CORPORAL HITLER AND THE GREAT WAR 1914–1918

THE LIST REGIMENT

JOHN F. WILLIAMS

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Adolf Hitler enlisted in the Bavarian Army in August 1914 as a war volunteer. Fanatically devoted to the German cause, between 1914 and 1918 Hitler served with distinction and sometimes reckless bravery, winning both classes of Iron Cross. Using memoirs, military records, regimental, divisional and official war histories as well as (wherever possible) Hitler's own words, this book seeks to reconstruct a period in his life that has been neglected in the literature. As a front-line soldier Hitler began his 'study' of the black art of propaganda; and, as he himself maintained, the List Regiment provided him with his 'university of life'.

This is not only an account of the fighting, however. Some of the most profound influences on Hitler occurred on home leave or as a result of official wartime propaganda, which he devoured uncritically. His conversion from passive to pathological anti-Semitism began while he was invalided in Germany in 1916–17. Hitler is here presented less as the product of high cultural forces than as an avid reader and gullible consumer of state propaganda, which fed his prejudices. He was a 'good soldier' but also a 'true believer' in fact and practice. It is no exaggeration to say that every military decision made by Hitler between 1939 and 1945 was in some way influenced or coloured by his experiences with the List Regiment between 1914 and 1918.

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INTRODUCTION

A book dealing with the experiences and Western Front battles of a German regiment in the Great War must, by its nature, be primarily a work of military history – primarily in this case, but not exclusively, for elements of biography are also present. The regiment in question is, after all, the sixteenth Bavarian Reserve Infantry, or List Regiment (so named after its first commander); a regiment whose principal claim to fame is the fact that Adolf Hitler served in its ranks for four years in the Great War. Although this work cannot claim (perhaps mercifully) to be yet another Hitler biography, it still has Hitler as its *raison d'être*. Without the presence of this Austrian-born Infanterist (soon to be corporal) in its ranks, the List Regiment merits no more attention than any one of the 800 or so German regiments that served on the Western Front in the Great War. Yet Hitler *did* serve in its ranks and that fact alone makes its story important. Between 1914 and 1918, Hitler claimed, he changed from a self-confessed 'weak-kneed cosmopolitan' into an anti-Semite and ardent pan-German nationalist. Again according to Hitler, he decided in the trenches that for Germany's sake he must place whatever dreams he held of architectural or artistic glory on hold, and instead devote his immediate post-war future to politics. As an adjunct – and there is no reason to disbelieve (in this case) his word – as a front-line soldier he began his 'study' of the black art of propaganda. And, as Hitler himself maintained, the List Regiment provided him with his university of life.

Much, but not all, which Hitler wrote or said about himself, his past and his struggles can be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. As for the words of first-hand witnesses, these too are often contradictory and sometimes driven by motives in which truth does not always figure prominently. None more so perhaps than some of the self-styled acquaintances from his Vienna days between 1908 and 1913. But the post-war memoirs of his former trench comrades of 1914–18 must also be treated with circumspection, even if the Führer and his Gestapo did find some observations revealing enough to warrant pulping editions and meting out varying degrees of punishment to the authors. Such negative observations, it must be said, always relate to Hitler's eccentricities, personality and sexuality,

never to his courage or soldierly virtues. Doubt no longer attaches to Hitler's courage under fire or his record as a Great War soldier. He was awarded both grades of the Iron Cross and deservedly so. There can be no doubt that he was a brave and fanatical soldier, and that his fanaticism stemmed from the (widely held) media-inspired belief that the Reich was ringed by enemies and must fight and win to achieve its rightful place in the sun. As for Austria-Hungary, his nominal homeland, Hitler had only contempt. By 1914 he already saw the future of German Austria (including much of Bohemia and Moravia) lying in an Anschluss with Germany, with the rest of the Habsburg domains being left to fragment as they may. The *degree* to which Hitler was an active anti-Semite in 1914, and how much his potentially eliminationist post-1919 attitudes grew, either out of belief or from political opportunism, will always be open to doubt. The evidence (apart from what he himself claimed) is inconclusive.

What does seem certain is that by August 1914 he already favoured a pan-German, anti-Marxist and anti-Socialist worldview. It is also apparent that, during the war, he was prepared to harangue any comrade, or group of comrades, willing to listen to his monologues. Hitler was neither a good observer nor a good listener. His mind was fixed and he was willing to see, read or hear only what further confirmed him in his prejudices. In the mostly volunteer List Regiment of October 1914, his was hardly a unique case. Most of these volunteers were like-minded, being patriotic true believers, to the point of gullibility, in the official Reich propaganda espoused in governmental, semi-governmental or independent right-wing newspapers of the day. Thus, we can be sure as to sources (newspapers primarily) influencing Hitler and motivating him to become the good soldier that he undoubtedly was. We can also be sure not only from the testimony of Hitler himself, but through the confirmatory sources of both friend and foe that in subsequent years he saw himself uniquely qualified – by virtue of his front-line service, self-belief in his talent for command and his dilettante's theoretical knowledge of the conduct of war – to dismiss men he sneered at as staff college strategists and assume the role of supreme commander of all Germany's forces. In Hitler's case, his Great War knapsack contained no marshal's baton, but the tunic of an all-powerful warlord.

It hardly exaggerates to say that every military decision made by Hitler between 1939 and 1945 was in some way influenced or coloured by his experiences with the List Regiment. In 1939–40 this may have worked in his favour. His first-hand field knowledge of French and Belgian Flanders (where the water table always lies just below ground level and the countryside is criss-crossed with drainage ditches and narrow lanes) must have told him that this was no country to employ a major panzer thrust. Instead of adopting a kind of mid-century Schlieffen Plan – using tanks and Stukas to follow the old German invasion route of 1914 – he chose to back a panzer thrust through the allegedly impassable Ardennes forest. Even Hitler's enthusiastic adoption of the concept of blitzkrieg itself can be seen to originate in his battle experiences in July 1918, when the regiment was forced into a headlong retreat, harassed in a co-ordinated counter

offensive by marauding French fighter-bombers backed up by artillery and Renault light tanks.

The List Regiment's greatest, in fact its only, serious successes were in defensive actions, particularly those short, sharp, violent, almost nineteenth-century-style battles on the Aubers Ridge in 1915–16. Given these experiences, it was easy for Hitler to believe that the well-entrenched and well-supplied German soldier, suitably motivated and ideologically reinforced, was invincible. What was true for most of 1914–18 on the Western Front was inappropriate when applied to the Eastern Front after 1943, a fact compounded by Hitler's total ignorance of the qualities of the Russian soldier. Hitler was surely proud that his regiment (unlike one of his division's sister regiments) was never sent East, for in the Great War the Eastern Front was the soft option; a front for much of the time – except in occasional moments of dire emergency – more than adequately entrusted to 3rd or 4th class divisions, many of them *Landsturm* or *Landwehr* units. Hitler never, fully appreciated that the inadequately supplied and led ill-trained Tsarist army of 1914–17 bore only a nominal resemblance to the Red Army of 1941–45, although this reality should have dawned on him well before Stalingrad. Yet his miscalculations based on obsolete 1914–18 prejudices were not limited to gross underestimations of an opponent's military worth. At a more banal level, until Stalingrad, Hitler saw no reason why the carbine that had served the German soldier so well in the Great War would not continue to function just as adequately in the Second World War. Until the mass manufacture of a similar weapon was undertaken, German soldiers were always at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* Soviet troops abundantly equipped with light, robust, reliable and frost-resistant sub-machine guns.

For four years the List Regiment provided Hitler with a surrogate family, a home and a university. In these years he learnt to love soldiering and find confirmation for his social-Darwinist belief in war as a necessary and indispensable racial hygiene, as much as it was the sole and rightful means available to a German Reich bent on achieving its rightful place in the sun. The subsequent career of Adolf Hitler the soldier – as distinct from the career of Adolf Hitler the criminal and sociopath – is thus irrevocably intertwined with the experiences of his years serving in the List Regiment, the kinds of battles in which it fought and, most importantly of all, his role as a dispatch runner, battlefield guide and observer in those battles.

1

A UNIVERSITY OF THE TRENCHES

> If I were twenty to twenty-five years younger, I'd be in the front line. I passionately loved soldiering.
>
> – Adolf Hitler (1941)

> I wouldn't feel I had the right to demand of each man the supreme sacrifice, if I hadn't gone through the whole 1914–18 war in the front line.
>
> – Adolf Hitler (1942)[1]

While the Wehrmacht was bringing Poland to its knees in 1939, Nazi propaganda sought to justify the renewal of warfare as the second and conclusive phase of an ongoing 25-year struggle for Germany's survival and place in the sun, a struggle (*Kampf*) which had only commenced with the inconclusive Great War (*Grosse Krieg*) of 1914–18. In this thesis, the Armistice that ushered in the false peace of 1919–39 had been the work of Germany's weak-willed 'November criminals', politicians and not soldiers, acting as little more than puppets manipulated by unpatriotic Judeo-Marxist and Socialist elements on the home front. This *Dolchstoss* or 'stab-in-the-back' myth had been reinforced by the fact that Germany's supposedly 'invincible' armies had been able to march home, unmolested and with banners unfurled, from the battlefields.

The November 1918 spectacle of returning divisions of comparatively well turned out German troops, marching proudly through the towns and villages of the Reich, was an illusionary one. It provided, however, admirable fodder for the *Dolchstoss* myth. It was easy to believe that this was no defeated army, rather an army betrayed, whereby the German soldier had been forced – with victory in sight – to lay down his arms, not because of enemy superiority, but through an act of treachery by political traitors on the home front. This was nonsense. Although it was far from obvious in the comportment of the returning troops, the sorely tried, demoralized, outnumbered, ill-fed and materially inferior German Army could not have survived far into 1919 without being overrun, and with that

opening the way for an Allied invasion of the Reich itself. Knowing this, the all-powerful military duumvirate of Hindenburg and Ludendorff had demanded that the Kaiser seek an armistice; a fact left unreported by the media of the day.

On every count the *Dolchstoss* was myth. Yet a convenient and comforting myth will always win out, in the short term, over an unpalatable truth. Although the *Dolchstoss* was regarded by liberal-democratic elements within Germany as a dangerous lie, there were more than enough festering support for the idea as a historical fact that it became a causal factor, 14 years after the armistice, in the ascent to power of Adolf Hitler. It was still being pressed into service, as a *revanche*-driven motivational device for German soldiers in 1939, by which time it was no longer necessary to utilize the idea as a means of achieving the political changes that would make Germany great again. Hitler and his National Socialists had seen to these, suppressing Germany's fragile democracy and bringing in its train measures repressing or even eliminating Jews, Socialists, Marxists and others deemed to be undesirable or opponents of the Hitlerian new order. Nevertheless, with revenge for the betrayal of November 1918 still treated as an article of faith, the *Dolchstoss* had an important role to play.

Official Nazi propaganda was seeped in Hitler's brutally social-Darwinist (but unoriginal) worldview, based on the thought processes of what H.R. Trevor-Roper called his 'coarse, powerful mind'. In 1939, at the forefront of propagandists taking their inspiration from the violent bricolage of chaotic, half-digested ideas that Hitler grandly called *Weltanschauung* was Werner Beumelburg. A Great War veteran, by the end of the Weimar era, Beumelburg had won a reputation as a serious, if *Dolchstoss*-besotted, military historian (most notably, perhaps, for his 1927 *Reichsarchiv* monograph on Third Ypres). Of no less interest to the Nazis were his aggressively right-wing critiques of Weimar art and culture and his prolific output of chauvinistic war poetry and novels. Beumelburg did not join the Nazis until after Hitler's rise to power, but in 1934 was granted honorary SS rank and became secretary of the National Socialist Academy for Literature. In 1939 he was commissioned to write a patriotic handbook for the soldiers of the Wehrmacht. His significantly titled *Von 1914 bis 1939: Sinn und Erfüllung des Weltkrieges* (From 1914 to 1939: Meaning and Significance of the World War) is a slim volume of 60 pages, tailored to fit (along with radically condensed and bowdlerized editions of Neitzsche's *Zarathustra* and the New Testament) in a Wehrmacht soldier's tunic pocket.[2]

Beumelburg's pamphlet (for it is hardly more) fulfilled the basic role of a lot of twentieth-century military propaganda; to convince young men of the righteousness of the cause for which they fight and the glory attached to death in battle. War, as presented here, was no longer the simple Clausewitzian pursuit of politics by other means, but a biological necessity. War provided stronger nations with their God-given right to expand at the expense of weaker ones, while guaranteeing – contradictorily given that war took the bravest and most vigorous soldiers – that the healthiest breeding elements survived to ensure the strength and vitality of future generations. Beumelburg was not original. His ideas derived, through Hitler,

from such nineteenth-century sources as the social-Darwinist theoretician Otto Ammon, the official Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke, as well as his former students Heinrich Class (the pan-German leader) and the influential General Friedrich von Bernhardi. Still, the ultimate and most significant adherent to this barbaric belief in war as a biological necessity was Adolf Hitler. A peace 'that lasts more than twenty-five years is harmful to a nation', he stated in 1942. 'Peoples, like individuals, sometimes need regenerating by a little blood-letting.'[3]

Among the young men for whom Beumelburg was writing in 1939 were many whose deaths would aid in this miraculous national regeneration. It was part of his function to convince them that death in battle was the sweetest of all and that the life of the individual counted for naught when weighed against the continuing existence and increasing greatness of the Fatherland. Beumelburg also recognized that young men would only be enthusiastic about laying down their lives for a leader in whom they had unconditional trust. He thus promoted his Führer's infallibility in much the manner that Hindenburg (and to a lesser extent, Ludendorff) had been exalted in the Great War and which helped them to become a de facto military dictatorship of two. The image of a powerless Kaiser under the thumb of his military chiefs was not lost on Hitler or Beumelburg. No Prussian field marshal would steal the glory or overrule the decisions of this supreme war-lord. In 1932, even before he had become Chancellor, Hitler was already championing his potential to be 'a great strategist of a new kind, a future war-lord in a sense and to a degree hitherto unknown'. In 1941 he boasted that 'A war-leader is what I am [because] I know that nobody would succeed better at this than I can.'[4]

It is scarcely open to doubt that many professional soldiers of the Wehrmacht – while owing personal allegiance to Hitler as Führer and supreme commander-in-chief – were far from prepared in August 1939 to accept their Führer's immodest assessments of his military genius. For them, there was no gainsaying the fact that the German armies in the field were under the final control of a south German dilettante, with little formal education (military or otherwise) to speak of, and who had never risen above the rank of corporal in the Great War. The bulk of the German people might be intoxicated by the peacetime achievements of their Messianic Führer, but how would professional officers or professionally trained conscripts respond to the leadership of such a neophyte in war? Beumelburg, with some skill, sought to turn Hitler's apparent deficiencies into advantages. For this new war, a different kind of leader was demanded; not one schooled in staff-college theory, but a leader of men with an insight into the national soul as could only stem from extended combat experience in the Great War. Metamorphosed into first soldier of the Reich and blessed with his 'steel-hard heart of field-grey', this former corporal would realize the unfulfilled expectations of 1914–18 and lead an awakened and purified Germany to its rightful place in the sun. Or, as Beumelburg described it:

> In the midst of the fighters at Langemarck in October and November of 1914 was the war volunteer Adolf Hitler, who today, based on a calling

> he received in that year and on an attitude he acquired at that time, stands at the head of the Greater German Reich. Beside him [in] that field-grey army of the best the world has ever seen, stood those who today assist him in his work. Generals who serve him today were young officers then. Politicians carried rifles... None among them could predict what Fate had in store, but all acquired the soldier's immortal heart, without which they would not be what they are today.[5]

Beumelburg was also concerned to draw firm distinctions between the Third Reich and its post-1870 forerunners. 'We brought the idea of community (*Gemeinschaft*) back with us from the war. We held it holy in the unconscious foundations of our hearts. It only needed to be awakened and made visible to enable achievements that would result in the final victory over our enemies from that time.' The Germany of 1870–1933 had been divided by 'parliamentarianism' and weakened by Judeo Marxism and Social Democracy. Political parties had encouraged class war, which tore at the fibre of the old Reich and enfeebled its ability and will to overcome the enemies without. All that changed in January 1933. In the ensuing six years, Hitler had eliminated parliamentary democracy, purged those deemed to be enemies of the state and re-established the meaning of duty and the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's or racial community).

> In February 1920 he announced the Party program of the NSDAP in the Munich Hofbräuhaus. Not until April of that year did the corporal take off his field-grey uniform, in order to dedicate himself to politics.
>
> He took off the field-grey uniform but kept his field-grey heart and field-grey mind. None of his speeches as propagandist for the movement, as party leader, from the dock, before the workers, before the middle class, before the old soldiers, before the youth – until finally these all merged together as a single block – as statesman, as Reich Chancellor and finally as the guiding hand of the Greater German Reich and as its advocate before the whole of humanity is without the deep inward declaration of his origins in the battlefields, without a moving thanksgiving to the Creator who had allowed him to pursue this path, along which all good Germans of his generation have passed.[6]

The *Leitmotiv* that this present war was no new war but the logical continuation of the war that began in 1914 dominates Beumelburg's text, just as it did Hitler's thinking.

Hitler had dropped out of high school recording a failure in German. Like many self-made men, he blamed teachers for his lack of scholarly achievement and retained a lifelong contempt for academics: 'entrust the world for a few centuries to a German professor', he once said, 'and you'll soon have a mankind of cretins, made up of men with big heads set upon meagre bodies'. His distrust

of formal education extended to staff colleges, which merely produced graduates with 'exaggeratedly theoretical minds. I'd like to know what becomes of their theories at the moment of action.' For Hitler, the autodidactic, self-made and self-appointed commander-in-chief, there was no substitute for empirical front-line experience gained, in his case, in the ranks during the Great War. Every utterance and every subsequent action suggests he honestly believed that he had learnt more about the 'problems of life' serving with the List Regiment in the Great War than would have been possible 'during thirty years at university'. Militarily the deficiencies of this 'education', while serving him in good stead in 1939–40, soon became apparent, for it was ultimately too limited and riddled with knowledge gaps to befit a true commander-in-chief.[7]

Adolf Hitler was an able and courageous soldier in the Great War, possessed of a fanatical devotion to Germany's cause. By the war's end he was entitled to wear both grades of the Iron Cross, awards won wholly on their merits. That much is certain. Further progress entails entering more obscure territory. While his letters and postcards sent from the Front in 1914 and early 1915 carry conviction, unfortunately he soon dropped the writing habit, leaving the Führer monologues from the 1930s and 1940s as a kind of ersatz evidence. The official archives are not of great use, for a corporal with two Iron Crosses and still only a corporal, and files on corporals are rarely extensive or informative. The little left over (in Hitler's case) after the attentions of the Gestapo, or Allied bombers in the Second World War, is unrewarding – which is not to say that there is a paucity of material describing Adolf Hitler's first great war. Indeed, in the early 1930s there was a proliferation of trench memoirs by former comrades, whose *raisons d'être* were inevitably their recollections of Hitler the front-line soldier. Subsequently, his former regimental adjutant wrote a memoir in the 1960s, which looks at his performance in the Great War and attempts to relate this to his subsequent conduct as a warlord. All of these works are politically tainted, either by self-justification or the propaganda and political dictates of the era. In the 1930s this implied an obligation to portray the Nazi leader as a wartime superhero, and by the 1960s to distance oneself from the monster by proclaiming astonishment at his post-1919 anti-Semitism and allege ignorance about the Holocaust that occurred as a consequence.

While some of the more hagiographic passages in the 1914–18 trench memoirs can seem laughable, there is nevertheless within them a leavening of verifiable material (particularly battle descriptions and depictions of the tedium and frightfulness of life at the Front) where the authors felt free of the need to glorify Hitler. At these times the memoirs by Adolf Meyer and Balthaser Brandmayer are convincing and accord with other descriptions, while even Hans Mend's controversial (but often quoted) work cannot be dismissed. Although it is not always possible to determine Hitler's actual actions in the battles in which he was engaged in, the German record of these battles, through regimental histories, monographs and official history, is fulsome. It is thus possible to decipher, broadly, the part Hitler most likely played in them and the dangers he shared and

faced; at least one can tell, with reasonable certainty, where he was on any given day of the war. While regimental histories (in the German case, often written by former senior officers who seek to put their own achievements in the best possible light) are never completely objective and naturally seek to glorify the regiment's achievement, the List Regiment history, published in 1932, is still one of the better written and more comprehensive examples of its kind. It can not be accused of pro-Hitler hagiography. The Nazi leader's former presence in its ranks is acknowledged on two pages only, the first acknowledging him as (in 1932) the leader of one of Germany's largest political parties, and the second for helping save the life of a recklessly foolish regimental commander in 1914.

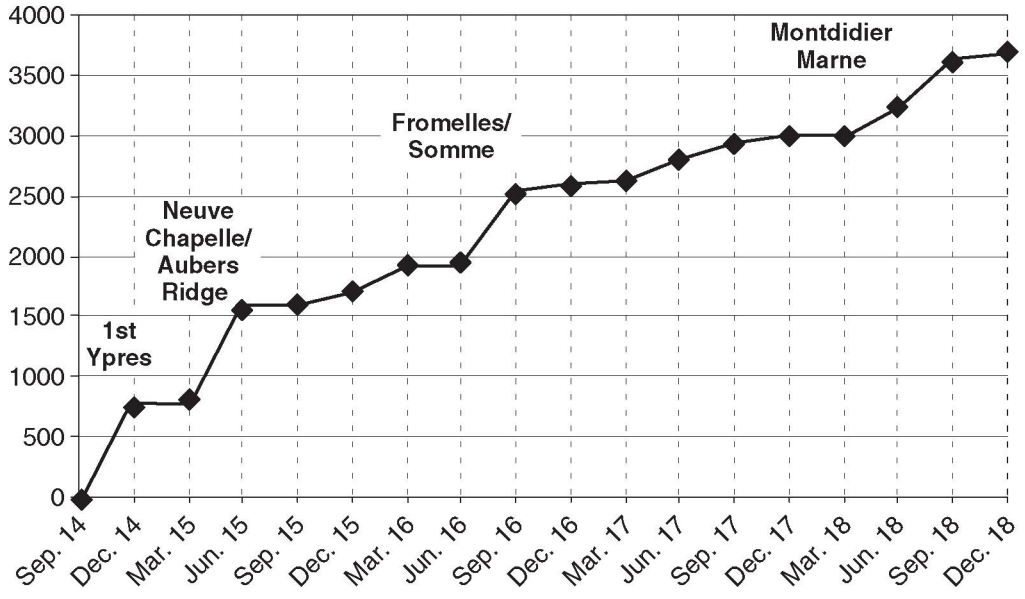
This particular act, for which Hitler and a fellow dispatch runner won the Iron Cross Second Class (EK2), was not the last piece of command stupidity for which the regiment was made to suffer. To a Briton, a Canadian or an Australian (brought up in the belief that all the 'donkeys' were British and that the Germans, by implication, were led by skilled professionals in an army that ran as a well-organized model of Teutonic efficiency), the story of the List Regiment and its suffering at the hands of bungling and even incompetent regimental, divisional and corps commanders might almost come as a relief. In fact the List Regiment was born in a muddle. Few in positions of authority believed that those untrained volunteers who, like Hitler, sought to enlist in August 1914 would ever be needed for a war that was expected to be over by Christmas. These volunteers were treated accordingly, given a perfunctory ill-organized period of training and equipped with obsolescent, barely functional and often incompatible technology. Yet when the war turned against Germany in September 1914, these enthusiastic amateurs were the only reserves available to help force a decision on the Western Front. They were now thrown into battle in Flanders, as veritable cannon fodder on a mission that in hindsight seems hopeless.

The List Regiment – officially the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment (RIR) – was a Munich-based unit and one of four (later three) average regiments in the second-class Sixth Bavarian Reserve Division or 6th BRD, a division which, after 1915, was never used in a lead-assault role. Its recruits were hardly the *crème de la crème* of German manhood, rather a motley assortment of callow youths and not always young, or fit, men from a range of backgrounds. Few of them – due to a curious and self-defeating German peacetime conscription policy – had even seen the inside of a military barracks. In Germany in August 1914, there were some two million such men, eligible and fit for military service, but completely untrained; enough men indeed, had they all volunteered and been accepted at the outbreak of war, to fill at least 60 reserve divisions. Despite the myth to the contrary (propagated in the press and ardently believed by Hitler), there was no rush of men in August 1914 to enlist. Rather than two million (or one million in less extravagant claims) enough young men turned up and were accepted to form a baker's dozen of divisions, including two from the Kingdom of Bavaria. Among those who did volunteer were many, like Hitler, who were idealistic true believers in the German cause. That the List Regiment

became his surrogate home is no surprise. For the first time in his life, he found himself among men who shared his *Bayrisch* dialect and worldview.[8]

Hitler later wrote that the 'volunteers of the List Regiment may not have learned to fight properly, but they knew how to die like old soldiers'. Élan and fanaticism were not enough. Yet in October 1914, the 6th BRD and similar all-volunteer reserve divisions were thrown into the breach near Ypres in a last futile attempt to regain the initiative lost at the Marne. Pitted against the sharpshooters of what remained of the old regular British Army, these half-trained troops were asked to capture Ypres and then hack their way to the nearby Channel ports. In this last, full-scale German Western Front *breakthrough* offensive (Verdun being attritional in aims) for three-and-a-half years, they were cut down *en masse*. After his regiment's first days' bloodletting, Hitler was chosen to be a dispatch runner and, shortly afterwards, promoted to corporal. In this brief period, the List Regiment had lost 20 per cent of all those killed in its ranks during the Great War. By the time Hitler won his Iron Cross Second Class in November 1914, the regiment was down to one-third combat strength. Few of the reinforcements now filling the gaps were volunteers.[9]

The slaughter near Ypres was a prelude to what was to come. The chart below illustrates how most of the regiment's losses occurred in four distinct periods. The first of these relates to the fighting near Ypres in October/November 1914, the second at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers in March/May 1915, the third at Fromelles and on the Somme in July–October 1916, while the last coincides with the fighting at Montdidier and the Marne battle of May–September 1918.



List regiment: Killed in action or died of wounds 1914–18[10]

With more than 3,700 men killed, the List Regiment's loss almost equals those of the entire kingdom of Bavaria in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. While these figures are some 50 per cent higher than the German regimental average in the Great War, they are not uncommon for a regiment that first saw action in 1914 and continued to function as a fighting unit for the duration of the war. In terms of casualties, the first two years of the war were by far the worst: two-thirds of total casualties were accounted for by the Battle of the Somme, halfway through the war. Casualty rates, however, do not tell the whole story. Evidence suggests that this capable defensive regiment suffered a blow to its morale in the last weeks of the Somme battle – its first actual experience of true modernist warfare – from which it never recovered. Much of 1917 was spent recuperating, but when sent to hold the trenches near Ypres in mid-July 1917, the already under-strength regiment was all but exhausted by a demoralizing two-week-long British artillery and gas barrage. When the British attack was finally launched, the regiment was in the process of being relieved. Forced back into the trenches and facing tanks for the first time, it crumbled and was withdrawn on, or immediately after, the first day of battle, 31 July 1917. Yet for the sheer intensity and gruesome nature of the fighting, perhaps the regiment's worst experience was in the attritional defensive action at Montdidier against a crack and much feared unit of French Zouaves in April 1918. Later still, in July that year, it trailed the attacking storm-troop divisions only to be routed by superior Franco-American forces and tactics devised around light (Renault) tanks and low-flying aircraft armed with anti-personnel bombs.[11]

Hitler was involved in all the List Regiment's major actions, as an *Infanterist* for the first two days and as a dispatch runner for the rest of the war. Despite what has sometimes been inferred, the dangers faced by dispatch runners could be extreme; at one time a regimental commander sent six men out with the same message in the hope one would get through. Hitler led a charmed life but his survival was not merely due to luck. Officers and men acknowledged his field-craft and his skill in detecting and avoiding dangerous hot spots. Sometimes the risks were not commensurate with the importance of the message. Hitler later complained of having 'to face a powerful artillery barrage, in order to carry a simple post-card!' Otherwise, for much of the war, the job of dispatch runner, being only occasionally arduous (albeit sometimes highly so), appears to have offered Hitler a privileged overview, giving him time to study battlefield tactics and an opportunity for measuring the consequences, at the Front, of decisions taken at regimental headquarters. He could thus observe tactical cause and effect without knowing the hell of a seemingly endless artillery bombardment in a claustrophobic shelter surrounded by men in various stages of nervous break-down. He was never obliged to help defend a fortified position day after day, week after week, comrades dying all around, only to see it abandoned as part of a general withdrawal.[12]

With all his defects, there are no recorded signs in the soldier of 1914–18 of the megalomania, psychopathology or criminality that would later emerge. Even

with hindsight, it is difficult to recognize in the apparently unambitious corporal of the Great War anything beyond the pan-German and anti-Semitic convictions common to many an enthusiastic war volunteer of 1914. As a soldier, Hitler was nonetheless (and this emerges even from the most hagiographic passages of his former comrades' memoirs) admired rather than liked. His eccentricity was not entirely likeable or always tolerable. He could also be malicious, was humourless, prudish, aloof and arrogant in manner, as well as self-righteously inflexible and driven by faith in his own destiny. Yet he was a cool and courageous comrade, respected for having helped save at least two men's lives and for being a good man to have at one's side.

A good soldier Hitler?

What motivated this Austrian draft dodger, once war was announced, to seek royal dispensation allowing him to serve in a Bavarian regiment and, once this was granted, to become a devoted soldier for the German Reich he considered to be his true Fatherland? Only a mercenary can be a good and effective soldier without the ideological support that belief in the nation and the righteousness of its cause provides. In the case of the conscript soldier, these beliefs may have to be inculcated by means of propaganda and indoctrination, but in the case of the war volunteer, it can only be assumed that they are already present. Since Hitler was surviving quite well in prewar Munich, the idea that he enlisted for purely pecuniary interests is preposterous.

Hitler was born, as he often liked to boast, a few hundred metres from the German border in a region of upper Austria that had been Bavarian until 1813; a region where the Austro pan-Germanism of the Graf von Schönerer flourished and was even promoted by school teachers and minor state functionaries, Hitler's father among them. Thus there was nothing unusual for a young petit bourgeois from the region around Linz to be, like Hitler, dedicated to the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the 'return' of his German Austrian homeland to a Greater German Reich. If the List Regiment provided him with his 'university', then his prewar experiences and the material he chose to read in Linz, Vienna and finally Munich provided him with the raft of ideas that he carried in his head, as self-motivational material, onto the battlefield. This inelastic young man had, by about 1914, probably assembled most of what would serve throughout his life as a core belief structure, based, he would have us believe, on the works of the great thinkers of Germany's recent past. Ralph Manheim, an early translator of *Mein Kampf*, is one of many scholars to dispute this claim. Classing Hitler as a 'poor observer', Mannheim thought it unlikely – based on Hitler's command of the German language – that he had 'ever read any of the German, let alone foreign classics'. Albert Speer also recalled him having no passion for philosophy or even history, listing Hitler's main interests as 'military literature, naval almanacs or tracts on architecture'. Military books, racist and right-wing political pamphlets, the ersatz wild-west novels of Karl May and above all newspapers – from which he

pastiched most of his ideology – were his staple. Hitler is on constant record as having been an avid newspaper reader, even as a youth in Linz.[13]

This autodidact was a war-lover who was good at what he loved. A good soldier can be a fearless and unfeeling killing machine; a state-sanctioned murderer no less, but society tends to celebrate his image based on more humane qualities: self-sacrifice, dependability, loyalty and steadfastness in adversity. Hitler's career as an *Infanterist* was brief, but he appears to have joined in the fighting on at least one other occasion, on the Aubers Ridge in May 1915. Even so, there is no record that Hitler killed anyone. Rather, he won his Iron Crosses helping to save lives or delivering messages. While the idea that the man who came to epitomize twentieth-century evil was a devoted soldier who saved lives may not be a comfortable one in societies that idolize and erect monuments to war heroes, he nevertheless won both grades of the Iron Cross deservedly and not as part of some 'crooked swindle'. All the same, Hitler's bravery demands qualification. When medals are awarded, who can say if the recipient has conquered the fears within in an act of selfless devotion? – Or if he is unstable, suicidal, indulging in an act of crazy bravado? – Or whether, like Hitler, he has a pathological belief that Destiny had chosen him for future greatness and will see him through the dangers of modern war? We have more than Hitler's word for this, since at least two other sources suggest as early as 1915 that Hitler believed in his invulnerability: 'you will hear much more about me later. Just wait until my time comes.' His comrades reputedly laughed. Hitler shook his head.[14]

The child is the father of the man, and no more so than in the case of Adolf Hitler. Like so many others of his generation, Hitler may be seen to have passed through a period of over-prolonged and self-indulgent adolescence (which he immodestly described as his 'years of hardship') into adulthood on the Western Front. Yet, despite the significance of his years with the List Regiment, this seems to be the least discussed period of Hitler's adulthood, and has even, in the hands of Lothar Machtan, Werner Maser and René Mathot, become a field for sensational, if unproven, improbable and unnecessary speculation about his sex life. On a sounder basis, we can state that Hitler put on a soldier's tunic in 1914 because he believed he could help make Germany great, and in 1939 he repeated the act because he believed that he *alone* could make Germany great. Making Germany great meant ridding first Germany and subsequently Europe of its Jews. Hitler's name is justly synonymous with the theory of eliminationist anti-Semitism and the practice of genocide, the one leading inexorably to the other. There are those who claim that Hitler's anti-Semitism was pure post-1919 political opportunism: indeed the intensity of his attacks on the Jews in the 1920s supposedly came as a surprise to Friedrich Wiedemann, his former regimental adjutant. Other comrades, however, remembered Hitler as a wartime prophet of the 'evils' of Judeo-bolshevism and even of the *Dolchstoss* to come. The decision by *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL) in mid-1916 (at the instigation of such anti-Semites as Ludendorff and the pan-German leader, Heinrich Class) to conduct an enquiry into the loyalty of Jews must have suggested to men like Hitler that where there

was smoke there was fire. In fact the enquiry drew the opposite results to those hoped for and was quietly hushed up. For Hitler, anti-Semitism went hand in glove with his pan-Germanist worldview and belief in war as the logical means of settling international disputes and asserting a nation's greatness.[15]

One might question the degree and nature of his, doubtless evolving, 1914–18 anti-Semitism, but not his patriotic conviction. He had no time for those Bavarians from his regiment who fraternized and exchanged gifts with British soldiers during the unofficial Christmas truce of 1914, and was bitter about men who, as early as 1915, aired the possibility of German defeat or indulged in the traditional soldier's right to complain. Corporal Hitler was probably not much fun to be around, but even so he was more individualist than loner. A man who needed an audience as much as companionship, he jealously guarded privacy and personal space. Those who came reasonably close were less than entranced with his holier-than-thou prudery and judgemental attitude. As late as 1918, he was still treated as a virgin and his guarded responses to teasing suggest he was; his attitude to women earned him the nickname 'women hater'. He bore other nicknames as well, all attesting to his ability to come through hazardous assignments without a scratch. What Hitler put down to proof of the guiding Hand of Providence, destining him for future greatness, comrades attributed to field-craft: 'You don't need to worry about Hitler', one said, 'he always gets through, even if he has to crawl like a rat up to the trench'. Hitler's ability to crawl, rat- or snake-like on his belly, was aided by his physique. Tall enough to stand out in group photos among the stocky Bavarians, he was thin to the point of emaciation; a situation exacerbated by a diet of *Barras* (army bread), marmalade and weak tea, supplemented (if he could find them) by potato dumplings and a slice or two of canned bacon (he was yet to become a vegetarian). Photos from 1915 to 1916 show a gangling form in a baggy uniform. A serious-looking narrow head topped off his lopsided stance, his facial features dominated by a sometimes straggly, sometimes Kaiser-like and sometimes droopy moustache. Although his uniform hung around his frame, both uniform and frame were as clean as he could make them; his obsession with hygiene was a byword. Those who failed to match his standards were treated with contempt. He christened one soldier the 'human dunghill'.[16]

'The trenches and Fromelles were his world', one former comrade wrote in 1931, 'what lay beyond didn't exist for him'. Hitler received few parcels or letters from Austria or Germany and, after early 1915, scarcely bothered to write. In the 18 months at Fromelles and Fournes, he never sought a 24-hour or weekend leave pass for Lille, just 10 miles away. Nor did he seek home leave. He had been at the Front two years before his wounding at Le Barque demanded repatriation to Germany. Incapacitated by the kind of 'Blighty' most soldiers dreamt of, he pleaded unsuccessfully to remain with a disintegrating regiment during its last, ghastly, week on the Somme. Recuperating in Germany and having been advised that he had been transferred, in fact promoted, to a first-class regular Bavarian division, he appealed (successfully) for the right to rejoin his old regiment and his comrades. His devotion and loyalty to regiment and Fatherland was complete.

In power after 1933, he rarely said 'no' to any former Lister who he remembered with admiration or affection. Thanks to Hitler's largesse, former List Regiment veterans formed a veritable clique at the heart of the Third Reich. As well as his former sergeant major and subsequent Nazi press baron Max Amman and Hitler's personal adjutant Friedrich Wiedemann, his deputy Führer Rudolf Hess was also a former Lister. Officers, whom he liked, such as a former regimental commander, Freiherr von Tubeuf, were fast-tracked for promotion in the post-1933 Wehrmacht, often to positions beyond their talents.[17]

This apparent post-war generosity, which Wiedemann claims extended to Jews, was out of character with the steel-hard image Hitler wanted to project and with his normal behaviour as well. He claimed the war made him hard, but the hardness was there from the start; his early letters from the Front to friends in Munich already reveal a man indifferent to suffering and more concerned to describe the ruins of buildings than the destruction of men. Later, he would occasionally wax sentimental over the death of an officer he admired, but his own words suggest that the only loss of a living being that moved him in the Great War was that of an adopted fox terrier. From other sources the dominant image that comes down of Hitler from 1914 to 1918 is of a cold and glum-faced fanatic who 'normally never laughs'. At times he seemed to cruise through the war as if sleepwalking; at other times, he showed a morbid curiosity for death and dead bodies, which he seemed prepared to risk his life to satisfy. His dedication was total: no task was too onerous and he seemed to welcome danger. Whatever the psychological reasons, Hitler was a cold and efficient soldier. How can it be that such a soldier was never promoted above the rank of corporal?[18]

Over the years, much has been made of his lack of promotion. It has been suggested that he was not even a corporal, but a private first-class or lance corporal, ranks that did not exist in the Bavarian Army. Surely, the winner of two Iron Crosses would have been promoted beyond corporal, or so the argument runs, at one stroke putting in doubt his soldierly abilities and the legitimacy of both Iron Crosses. Yet, millions of men fought in the Great War, many of them decorated, without rising to even the rank of a corporal. Hitler did nothing to seek promotion and was content to remain a dispatch runner. For a man who had found security in a group, promotion might have meant transfer, and that he was unwilling to risk. Moreover, as Wiedemann later pointed out, Hitler's unsoldierly bearing and eccentric ways ensured that he was never a candidate for promotion, and given that he was a non-German, could he really expect to rise higher in the Bavarian army? His odd displays of dumb insolence cannot have helped his case either. A Bavarian officer had to be treated with respect, even if he was a Jew. Hitler's show of contempt for at least one Jewish officer would have done nothing for any promotion chances.

Fritz Fischer describes Hitler as coming 'not from Heaven or Hell! Hitler was no *Betriebsunfall* [accident in the works]', for his 'world of ideas' belonged deep in the 'German history of the 19th and 20th centuries'. Which is not to say that some other German of his era could not have pastiched together his so-called

Weltanschauung, or encouraged the criminality carried out in his name. How much of this *Weltanschauung* evolved out of the Great War? Did he (as he claimed) have a second anti-Semitic awakening in Munich while on leave in 1916? Did he, as he also claimed, decide about mid-way through the war that his post-war future career lay in politics as an adjunct, perhaps, to a career in the arts and architecture? Since we only have Hitler's word, neither his (second) anti-Semitic conversion nor his wartime decision to enter politics can be accepted with certainty. Even so – and given that a belief in political ideals and political activity are not the same – the fact that Hitler was politically committed in 1914–18 can hardly be doubted. Comrades recalled monologues on the evils of freemasonry, Social Democracy and Judeo-Marxism, for he already appears to have had a retinue of followers who seemed to see him as a luminary. Hans Mend was not one of them, but still claimed, 'between 1915 and 1916 in the house of "Black Mary" at Fournes [Hitler] gained his first National-Socialist followers'. Officers were less impressed. Wiedemann thought Hitler's interests 'wider reaching' than most soldiers. Even so until 1916 he only 'wanted to be an artist, loved all newspapers, and philosophized about political and ideological (*weltanschauliche*) questions in the primitive manner of simple folk'.[19]

Amman believed that Hitler was 'first and foremost a soldier'. An unconventional and eccentric soldier to be true, but a soldier who, like any other soldier, formed his view of war out of ideology and beliefs, shaped by the experience that go with his rank and duties, as well as the nature of the fighting he is exposed to. An autodidactic and strategic dilettante, had Hitler been an infantryman, bomber, machine-gunner or artillery man, served on the Eastern Front or in a unit heavily committed to one or more of the ghastly, attritional, Western Front battles of Verdun, the Somme, Arras or Third Ypres (Passchendaele), then his attitudes to war and appreciation of military tactics and planning must have been different. Hitler believed that his intuition, backed by an eclectic study of military tactics and technology, when added to his experience as a front-line soldier, uniquely qualified him for the highest command. Events finally proved him wrong, but it was, as history shows, a close-run thing.[20]

2

1913–14: THE CURATIVE POWER OF WAR

> War the only medicine for our people.
>
> – Heinrich Class[1]
>
> Might is at once the supreme right.
>
> – General Friedrich von Bernhardi[2]

Hitler had been living in Munich for some 14 months when news of the 28 June 1914 assassinations in Sarajevo appeared. At first, he was 'seized with worry that the bullets may have been shot from the pistols of German students'. When he discovered the assassins were Serbs, 'a light shudder began to run through me . . . The greatest friend of the Slavs had fallen beneath the bullets of Slavic fanatics.' There is no way of telling whether Hitler imagined a localized or more general European conflagration might result, but as a pan-German and confirmed believer in the paranoiac worldview that Germany was ringed by hostile and jealous enemies, he must have welcomed the latter prospect. A few weeks after these assassinations, the first anti-Serb, pro-Austrian demonstration exploded in Munich. On Saturday, 25 July, the landlord of the Café Fahrig was unwise enough to seek to dampen the noise by banning the playing of patriotic songs. For his troubles, he saw his establishment smashed up by drunken students, some of whom would soon be swelling the ranks of the List Regiment. More prudently, the patron of the Conzert-Café Fürstenhof decided not to disturb the revellers but found it impossible to clear the café of noisy, drunken demonstrators until late on the Sunday morning. Since the tenor of street and other demonstrations was solidarity with Austria, it is unlikely that Hitler, given his hatred of the Habsburg state, would have been involved. When news of Germany's declaration of war against Russia was announced on 1 August 1914, however, he immediately became animated. This was now a *German* war for *Germany*'s future. Next morning he joined in the singing of *Deutschland über Alles* amidst the throng that had assembled in Munich's Odeonsplatz.[3]

For the next 30 years, the neo-classical Odeonsplatz with its Italianate *Feldherrnhalle* (war memorial) would be a site of historic and quasi-religious significance to Hitler and the Nazi movement. Here, on 9 November 1923, the beer-hall putsch was put to rout. Ten years later, a specially erected memorial 'to the sixteen fallen of 9 November 1923' was 'consecrated' by the Reich chancellor, Adolf Hitler. Henceforth the *Feldherrnhalle* became the focus for some of the most chilling spectacles of the Nazi death cult. Traces of its Nazi past are now all but obliterated, except for a simple plaque, set on the wall after the Second World War, to commemorate the policemen who fell fighting *against* the coup of 1923. Today the *Feldherrnhalle* appears much as it did on that first Sunday of August 1914. On that day a military band was playing on its forecourt, some street urchins idled about on the lions set on the top of its steps, and at least two cameramen were present in the crowd, one of them being Hitler's future court photographer Heinrich Hoffmann. Years later, when Hoffmann told Hitler that he had been there, Hitler too 'explained, "I was in that crowd." After meticulous search, we picked him out.'[4]

Hoffmann's photograph shows a throng with a provincial Sunday best look. On 2 August they must have been there in support of Germany's declaration of war against Russia, not, as has been claimed, against France (which came two days later). Fridolin Solleder, a Munich journalist, local historian and war volunteer – who later edited and contributed to the official history of the List Regiment – recalled the 'whole of Munich united at midday in front of the *Feldherrnhalle* in a unique rally for the Fatherland'.

> Every precious passion that lives in man seemed let loose. The melodies, soldierly airs and enthusiastic words that soared heavenwards sounded like a song of praise to German strength, German confidence. It was an avowal of friendship and brotherhood [and] for many a last leave-taking. I shook the hand of many a man who within the year would forever rest in foreign soil.[5]

Although Hoffmann's picture, with its narrow angle and subsequent cropping, tends to support the impression, nothing like the whole of Munich was present that Sunday morning. A surviving filmstrip of the event reveals an Odeonsplatz that was far from overflowing. Filmed adjacent to where Hoffmann was standing, in a span of perhaps 10 seconds, it sweeps from bandsmen to street urchins to the throng on the square. Until they become aware of the cameraman, they seem restless and apprehensive, anything but buoyant. Only when the camera pans on them do they erupt, on obvious cue from the cameraman. *At this moment, Hoffmann tripped his shutter.*[6]

To retrace Hitler's steps somewhat, he had arrived in Munich from Vienna on Sunday, 24 May 1913; the day after the king-emperors of the German, British and Russian empires had met in Potsdam for the marriage of the Kaiser's daughter

Viktoria Luise. On Monday 'official', 'semi-official' and otherwise regime-friendly Reich newspapers were bubbling with enthusiasm about a joint communiqué issued by the leading statesmen of the three empires who had been present at the wedding. The foremost governmental mouthpiece, the *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, saw this communiqué and the buoyant mood of optimism in Potsdam as signs of the 'onset of a brilliant new era in international relations'.[7]

All was not as it seemed. The next day the Kaiser warned George V's private secretary the Slavs were becoming 'restless now and want to attack Austria'. Since Germany was obliged to stand by its ally, he expected Russia, France 'and then England' to attack Germany. Although 'a man of peace', Wilhelm insisted that 'all who fall upon me can be annihilated – and I will annihilate them'. No hint of his brinkmanship was leaked to the press. Thus, the first news to greet Hitler on his arrival in Munich was that of the German emperor and his secretary of state publicly courting the Russian Tsar. Another item at this time would have been more to his taste. In Vienna, a scandal had erupted over the suicide of the chief of Austrian army intelligence. Colonel Redl, a homosexual and a Jew, had been blackmailed by Russian intelligence into passing on state and military secrets. On reading of Redl's death, Hitler, according to his landlord, was delighted. The suicide must have seemed like a metaphor for the fate of Austria-Hungary, an omen confirming Hitler's belief that the Austrian Army was but the feeble sword-arm of an empire on the path to extinction.[8]

The young man who arrived in Munich in 1913 was neither penniless nor friendless. Rudolf Häusler, a pal who had accompanied him from Vienna, was of similar background and shared Hitler's political views. Hitler offered to pay and Häusler readily agreed to accompany him, but first Hitler had to wait for his share of an inheritance from his father's will. After a frustrating month in limbo, they finally left Vienna by overnight train. Years later Hitler told confidants that he came to Munich intending to study 'for another three years... as a designer. I'd enter for the first competition, and I told myself that then I'd show what I could do!' Nothing came of this, but Hitler seems hardly to have been disappointed. It was enough for him to be in the German city of his dreams, which seemed 'as familiar... as if I had lived there for years within its walls'. Munich was a '*German* city. What a difference from Vienna! I grew sick to my stomach when I thought back on this Babylon of races.' Yet, the Italianate Bavarian capital was arguably the least *German* city of the Reich. In 1913 there were men living there who, less than 50 years before, had fought with Austria against Prussia. Four years later in 1870–71, many of them fought again, with the Prussians this time, in a war against France that saw the creation of Bismarck's second German Empire.[9]

Berlin was far from being all-powerful in the Bismarckian Reich. In the name of imperial unity, Bismarck ensured that Bavaria and the other nation-states of his Reich maintained a degree of domestic political autonomy and that they were well subsidized by the imperial exchequer. In 1913, following the 26-year reign (1886–1910) of the prince regent, Luitpold, the kingdom of Bavaria

was on the way to transforming itself into a limited constitutional monarchy on the English model. Indeed, the Wittelsbach kingdom, a thriving, semi-autonomous nation-state, had become Germany's major producer of automobiles, aeroplanes and Zeppelins, and housed the lion's share of German firms in the light-to-medium manufacturing sector. Its capital Munich was widely regarded as the most liberal and progressive of German cities and the Reich's most important centre of early twentieth-century modernist culture. While Bavarians were too proud of their identity to ever feel Prussian, they could nevertheless share a common sense of being German with those cold northerners. After four decades of nationalistic and imperialistic propaganda, many of these south Germans were as militaristic as the Prussians, regretful that Bavaria's military record over recent centuries left something to be desired. The coming war thus represented a chance to win battle honours and for Bavarians to hold their heads high among the peoples of the Reich; Hitler's actions when war was announced suggest how much this sentiment affected him. Braunau, the town of his birth, lay 'on the boundary between two states' and, while 'technically Austrian [was] Bavarian by blood'. From his childhood – much of which was spent in the German border town of Passau – Hitler had been brought up to consider himself Bavarian.[10]

In Vienna, his accent and dialect had marked him out as an upper-Austrian, but in Munich his Linz-Passau *Bayrisch* was but a variation of the local dialect. Shortly after their arrival, he and Häusler found a third-floor room in the house of master-tailor Popp, the main occupant of a terrace at 34 Schleissheimerstrasse. Popp's wife immediately made this 'Austrian charmer' welcome. Her husband, who had worked in Paris and regarded himself as a man of the world, quickly saw in Hitler 'a personality whose abilities entitled him to the highest hopes'. Hitler was not the first twentieth-century dictator to live in Schleissheimerstrasse. A few years earlier Lenin had lodged about a block away. Today the area appears much as it did in Hitler's (or Lenin's) time. A small playground, which Hitler sketched from his window, still lies opposite. While its 1930s' Nazi-era plaque was pulled down in 1945 along with its ornate stucco façade, 34 Schleissheimerstrasse is still identifiable as Hitler's first Munich home.[11]

Hitler was exaggerating when he claimed that in the 15 months prior to the outbreak of the Great War, Munich gave birth to the 'various circles which today [1924] faithfully support the National Socialist movement'. In his statement that Hitler had established a 'large circle of new friends with whom he was to correspond from the Front', Werner Maser appears to accept Hitler's word at face value. But Maser also contradicts himself by describing Hitler as a 'lone wolf [who] desired neither acquaintances or friends'. Nevertheless a few names do emerge from the period. Graf von Schwerin and a man named Baumann both joined Hitler in the List Regiment in 1914 and were killed in 1915, while Ernst Hepp, a judicial assessor, is described by Machtan as 'the friend and patron that [Hitler] long sought'. Lover too, if Machtan is believed. Evidence for this is absent, but not for their *ideological* closeness. On 5 February 1915, Hitler wrote from the Front to Hepp in terms redolent with pan-German ideology.

> I often think of Munich, and each one of us has only one wish: that he might soon get a chance to even scores with that crew [and] those of us who are lucky enough to return to the Fatherland will find it a purer place, less riddled with foreign influences, so that the daily sacrifices and sufferings of hundred of thousands of us and the torrent of blood that keeps flowing here day after day against an international world of enemies, will not only help to smash Germany's foes outside but our inner internationalism, too, will collapse.[12]

The identity of 'that crew' is not hard to divine. Hitler's aversion to foreign influences and his idea of a Fatherland purified by war echo the words of Heinrich Class, as does the image of a Germany, spiritually corrupted by cosmopolitan forces, fighting for its life against a ring of enemy states. But Hitler, the Austrian citizen, differed from such Reich pan-Germans as Heinrich Class in respect of the Habsburg state's future. 'Austria will fare as I have always said she will', he wrote. Already in 1915, he was sure that the war must bring Austria-Hungary's downfall.[13]

Years later, the Popps regretted not having discovered 'who his associates were'. Hitler was not being rude or insensitive in failing to introduce his friends; Anna Popp insisted that she had 'never met a young man with such good manners'. Yet, the Popps' account of Hitler in Munich is filled with inconsistencies. While 'a whole week' might pass 'without a sign of Hitler', he was still and miraculously able to join them in 'political discussions every evening'. When not painting in his room, the lodger, who was rarely present, spent 'most of the time' with his 'nose buried in heavy books'. Circumstances and survival probably demanded that Hitler put his energy not into reading books, but into painting. From the moment he arrived in Munich, according to Anna Popp (in yet another contradiction):

> Hitler began to paint immediately and remained working for hours. After a few days, I saw two beautiful pictures that he'd finished on his table, one of the cathedral and the other of the Theatiner church. Then early in the morning my lodger went out, a briefcase under his arm, looking for buyers. For the most part, he visited the same people who had already shown interest in his work.[14]

Meanwhile, Häusler was finding Hitler an exhausting room-mate. Hitler often left the 'lamp burning until three or four in the morning', or kept him awake with 'agitated monologues all night'. Worn out by nocturnal diatribes, Häusler moved to another room. With no ill feeling it seems, since they remained in contact and Häusler later became a Nazi functionary in Vienna. When not painting, 'from time to time Hitler visited the local café ... read the daily papers and ate pastries'. Official records show that Hitler registered himself with the Munich police as

a 'painter and writer' and entered a period that he later described as 'the happiest and by far the most contented of my life'.[15]

Ironically, this anti-modernist *par excellence* spent his formative years in central Europe's two foremost modernist cities during the final phase of a south-Germanic cultural golden age. In Munich, though he frequented the bohemian quarter, he had little in common with the Schwabing radicals whose names resonate down the decades. De Chirico and Lenin had departed recently but in 1913 or 1914, Hitler might have passed Kandinsky or Franz Marc in the street. He might have rubbed shoulders with Thomas Mann, Bruno Walter or Richard Strauss – or stopped for a coffee and browsed newspapers at the *Simpl*, where the editors, illustrators and writers of *Simplicissimus*, Germany's most irreverent satirical magazine, held court. Anton Joachimsthaler thinks it 'scarcely credible' that Hitler 'discussed politics' at that time, but agrees with Maser that he 'spent a part of his time in cafés and pubs, where he read newspapers'. This habit was already ingrained. Manheim thought Hitler became 'a voracious newspaper reader' in Vienna, while Brigitte Hamman believes he began 'to devour newspapers' earlier still, during his adolescence in Linz. In Munich there was a wide choice from which he might feed his habit and improve his education, for the German press of that era is said to have excelled 'that of any other country as an educational and cultural medium'. Through newspapers Hitler could reinforce his political and racial prejudices, acquire a veneer of high culture and gain insights into the writings of the (mostly dead) figures he later claimed as spiritual and philosophical precursors. As Führer, he was fond of telling how, in his days of struggle, he spent every spare moment head buried not in newspapers but the classics. Yet, as Ian Kershaw points out, the idea 'that Hitler had read an impressive list of classics' should be 'treated with a large pinch of salt'.[16]

As well as a two-volume *History of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71*, a dedication on the flyleaf in a copy held by the US Library of Congress indicates that Hitler owned Heinrich Class's so-called *Kaiserbuch* as well. All his life, Hitler skimmed through books as though they were newspapers, digesting their contents 'haphazardly, without direction'. But as Trevor-Roper noted, 'accumulation and memorization is not necessarily thought'. A former personal secretary remembered him memorizing 'sources word for word' and by restating them, encouraging the deception 'that everything he said was the result of [his] own critical thinking'. In Munich in 1913–14, for the price of a cup of coffee, this man who 'loved all newspapers' could read everything from the local mass-circulation *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* to such national (*überregional*) papers as the *Post*, *Germania* and the government's own *Norddeutsche Zeitung*. Hitler must also have been aware of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Berliner Tageblatt*, left-liberal organs of the 'so-called intellectual press' written by Jews 'for our intellectual demi-monde'.[17]

Despite Munich's modernist veneer, the roots of Catholic traditionalism ran deep and reactionary forces were ever present. Hitler would have found the thinking in Stefan George's literary circle more to his liking than anything emerging from

the cafés and ateliers of the avant-garde. Had they met, George must have despised the plebeian Hitler, but they shared in common a desire to call Munich 'home'. Whereas Hitler was leaving behind Vienna's racial 'Babylon', George was escaping Berlin's 'mish-mash of junior officials, Jews and whores'. Hitler would also have been aware of the George circle's *Blätter für die Kunst*, a fine-art journal that bore a Swastika on its cover and maintained an ongoing assault against modernism. George's circle, with the fanatical Alfred Schuler in the vanguard, was notably anti-Semitic. Even if there was, as yet, no anti-Semitism in Munich on the Berlin, let alone Vienna scale, that city nevertheless boasted publishing houses specializing in material bent on proving the dangers of 'racial' mixing. In 1909, it had already established a Society for Racial Hygiene, the brainchild of a Swiss-born eugenicist Julius Friedrich Lehmann. In the 1930s, Lehmann, at Hitler's instigation, was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Munich university medical faculty.[18]

Hitler, with his limited education, petit bourgeois ways and moderate talent, could never be part of Munich's sophisticated art world. Nevertheless, the Great War may have ended what Maser and Joachimsthaler suggest was a viable career as a water colourist of picturesque urban scenes, which were marketed to tourists and visitors at beer halls and other sites. Maser claims that Hitler's 'average earnings' from the sales of these works amounted to the 'then considerable sum of a hundred marks a month'. While Machtan appears to accept this figure, he (predictably and without verifiable evidence) prefers to believe that Hitler acquired it as a rent boy operating from Schwabing's homosexual cafés and bars. The frugal Hitler really had no reason to sell his body. He was no fine artist struggling to survive in a garret and hoping for the solo exhibition that might bring him fame, rather a competent and efficient producer of commercially saleable paintings for a clientele that knew little about art, but knew what it liked. Then as now, the demands of this market are reasonably competent draftsmanship, a steady production flow and salesmanship. Hitler appears to have met these requirements.[19]

After years of draft dodging to avoid serving in the hated Austro-Hungarian army, Hitler was finally discovered by Austrian military authorities in January 1914 and forced to report to the Austrian consulate in Munich. There he persuaded the consul to allow him a period of grace before reporting for the medical exam that preceded his induction into the Austrian military machine. He used this time possibly to work on his physical appearance, but certainly to wrangle the right to be examined in Salzburg, at a date convenient to him, rather than in Linz at a date that suited the authorities. Thus, on 5 February 1914, an apparently emaciated, malnourished Hitler 'during the final registration muster of class III in Salzburg, [was] found unfit for military and auxiliary service'. Sure at last that he would not have to serve the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he was free to return to the Reich and its city of his dreams.[20]

As an Austrian brought up on the 'slovenly, illogical, pretentious' style of Viennese newspapers, the superior quality of the German press must have been a revelation to Hitler in 1913. By May that year, the latest phase of an anti-French propaganda

campaign had been under way for two months. This was probably (and perhaps even unintentionally) instigated by the Kaiser when, in one of his more impetuous moments, he told a secret war council that he favoured 'immediate war against Russia and France', calling for every effort be made 'to bring home to the German people the need for a war'. The war of words that resulted was first directed at France and was launched by the *Kölnische Zeitung*, the semi-official but acknowledged foreign-office mouthpiece. On 10 March 1913, the Cologne paper thundered 'Never have our relations with our western neighbour been as tense as today'. It was ignoring 1870–71. Ingenuously (given its close links in the corridors of power) it 'demanded' that the Government explain 'without covering-up harsh facts [the] ominous danger which all the world feels to be posed by *France*'.

> Never has it been so obvious that France demands Russian collaboration and English friendship for one sole purpose; to steal Alsace-Lorraine back from us... It is from this corner therefore, that the world [war] may first ignite; we, to be quite sure, must one day cross swords with France. When that will happen, no one can know, but it is certain the French will take advantage of every opportunity to march against Germany.[21]

Outside Germany, these words were naturally assumed to reflect government policy and were treated as a threat to European peace. The situation worsened when the right-wing mass-circulation dailies began to take up the theme in similar language. Although left-liberal papers distanced themselves, distancing did not always mean disowning. Atypically, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* actually blamed French 'hatred for Germany and the hope for *revanche*', and not the *Kölnische Zeitung*'s bombast, for creating the problem. The official Socialist organ *Vorwärts*, however, washed its hands of this 'disgusting and mendacious smear campaign'. Nevertheless, the prevailing opinion across the spectrum of German opinion seemed to be that while the *Kölnische Zeitung*'s language had been crude, its observations had a ring of truth.[22]

The pan-German press was quick to take up the most extreme position, with the *Post* calling for not only a 'final confrontation with France', but a war for *Lebensraum* in order to provide 'new German homes for our surplus population'. Endorsing war as 'the only means that can save our nation from advancing physical and psychological deterioration', by February 1914 it was advocating a pre-emptive strike. 'France is not yet ready to fight. England is involved in domestic and colonial difficulties. Russia shuns war because it is afraid of revolution at home. Are we to wait until our opponents are ready or shall we seize a propitious moment to bring about a decision?' The Catholic *Kölnische Volkszeitung* was not alone in ridiculing the *Post*'s 'pessimism and frivolity'. Then on 2 March 1914, almost 12 months since the day it had launched its propaganda campaign against France, the *Kölnische Zeitung* turned on Russia, seeking to destroy 'for all time the legend of the historic German–Russian friendship'.

> For some time Russia has been set on a course whose aim, if it remains undisturbed, will be reached in the autumn of 1917...
>
> Two years ago there was still some reluctance to say so but now it is admitted openly, even in official military journals, that Russia is arming for war with Germany.[23]

This time it probably went too far, for this outburst caused crashes on all European exchanges. With the financial markets in free fall, Germany's principal business paper, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (perhaps, as Fischer speculates, 'on instructions from the Foreign Ministry'), warned against the dangers of succumbing 'to a nervousness that offers armaments enthusiasts and war fanatics a fertile soil'. *Germania* wrote as though war was imminent, blaming Russia and particularly France, where 'the war party, undeterred by the resulting threat to the general international situation, continues its insidious agitation'. Meanwhile, the *Post*, through General Friedrich von Bernhardi, was again taking the most extreme position, endorsing a pre-emptive strike as 'the best possibility'. Germany must 'shape the political situation so that we could commence the offensive in a necessary war under the most favourable general conditions possible'. A week later the same paper saw a war 'looming such as history has never seen'.[24]

The bourgeois left was no longer speaking with one voice. While the *Frankfurter Zeitung* now began to preach peace, on 9 March 1914, the *Berliner Tageblatt* began a blatant fear campaign directed at Russia. Traditionally hostile to the Kaiser, the *Tageblatt* now portrayed him as being 'peace loving to the core' and praised his efforts to deal with 'an overpowering, fully armed neighbour' who sought to deprive Germany 'of light and air'. While appearing to reject calls for a preventive strike on Bismarck's grounds that this represented 'suicide from fear of death', the *Tageblatt* still insisted on Germany's right to not allow the enemy the opportunity of choosing 'what seems to him the best moment for the *coup de grâce*'. In a few years Germany could be overwhelmed by the 'enormously increasing population of this world empire [and the] well-nigh inexhaustible stream of money flowing from France', leaving no choice but 'recourse to the sword'. Even Socialists doubted Russia's peaceful intent, but saw no grounds for a pre-emptive strike. Russia was in no position as yet to fight a modern war against a powerful enemy. In the meantime the Russian proletariat, with memories of the crushed revolution of 1905, was likely to revolt before the Tsarist regime could achieve the necessary preparedness. *Vorwärts* simply dismissed all war talk as being in the interests of capitalism. For years, an 'Anglo-German war was declared to be inevitable and year after year increases in naval armaments were demanded, now Russia is declared to be the enemy... Armament-pushers are in constant need of a bugbear, in order to generate the fear necessary to further their crazy aims.'[25]

The erratic Kaiser had made enough political and diplomatic gaffes in his 25-year reign. He had learnt the hard way and now held himself above and aloof from the war talk he had done so much to instigate. Accused of weakness by the

pan-Germans and prodded by the patriotic leagues to take a more aggressive public stand, one can but imagine the frustrations besetting this vain, unstable man. With a personality sometimes resembling that of a grown-up playground bully, Wilhelm was prone to violent mood swings; the 'Prince of Peace' one moment might be a vainglorious warlord the next. Yet the closer conflict came, the more Wilhelm appeared to retreat from it, even from the war with Russia that he clearly saw as the final racial showdown for '*the existence* of the *Teutons* on the European continent'. His chief at OHL, Count Helmut von Moltke, thought similarly. Thus, while the Reich's two most powerful military figures were flirting with a two-front racial war, the pan-Germans – in their ignorance of this reality – continued to demand both internal action against the so-called unpatriotic party of subversion and for Germany's position as a 'rising world power [to] be contested with iron dice. Our enemies have long lain in wait for a suitable moment at which to attack us.'[26]

Since 1908, the peace had been threatened on two occasions and both times averted by the last-minute resolve of European statesmen. The disintegration of Turkey's Balkan empire was leaving a vacuum that both Austria-Hungary (backed by Germany) and the Slav succession state of Serbia (backed by Russia and by extension France) sought to fill. As the Teutons saw it, a tiny, troublesome Slav kingdom was thwarting their ambitions in the Balkans; a situation that could only be resolved through an Austro-Serb war. If Entente opinion was neutralized, this war could still be 'localized' and in early 1913 the Reich foreign secretary, Jagow, ordered discussions with the Austrians as to how best to reassure St Petersburg that any Austro-Serbian conflict would be 'of an exclusively local nature'. The same explanation could suffice for Paris and London. Back in April 1913, the Kaiser was already concerned that the 'fight between Slavs and Germans can no longer be circumvented, it is coming surely. When? One will soon find out.' Yet while relations between Germany and continental Entente partners plummeted, they were better than they'd been for years with Great Britain. After 20 years of acrimonious name-calling, a cautious respect ruled relations between Britain and Germany. The British, as Winston Churchill pointed out, were still concerned about German intentions towards Belgium, but they were reassured by the recent conduct of Germany's statesmen: the 'policy of Germany towards Great Britain had not only been correct, but considerate'.

> All through the tangle of the Balkan Conferences British and German diplomats laboured in harmony... The personalities who expressed the foreign policy of Germany, seemed for the first time to be men to whom one could talk and with whom common action was possible. The peaceful solution of the Balkan difficulties afforded justification for the feeling of confidence.[27]

The mythology and propaganda surrounding the 'Spirit of 1914' has disguised the fact that most Europeans did not view a general European war with equanimity,

either a war in August 1914 or at some time in the future. Nor were these people, their politicians or their newspapers resigned to its necessity or probability, until the last minute when hope seemed lost. Ordinary civilians were not the only ones feeling less than passionate about the possibility of war. While stressing Austria's need for 'an ostensible success in the eyes of the world', the Kaiser was still worried about the blank cheque the Germans had granted their ally. His political and military advisers, while hoping war might be localized, also recognized that an Austro-Serb conflict was a high-risk operation that could lead to a general European conflagration. In choosing to run this risk they were encouraged by the apparent reassurances from Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, that Britain would remain neutral in the event of a *four-power* continental war, as well as the domestic problems plaguing Entente powers. In Britain what Churchill called 'the haggard, squalid, Irish quarrel…threatened to divide the British nation into two hostile camps', while in France a scandal over that nation's lack of military preparedness had broken. There was also good news (for the Germans) from Russia, where a strike by Baku oil workers was spreading and had observers wondering whether this would lead to the long-expected follow-up revolution to 1905. The degree to which Entente problems affected German thinking is shown by a 19 July note from the Bavarian *chargé d'affaires* in Berlin. While Austria's demands were 'incompatible with [Serbia's] dignity as a sovereign state', Berlin was 'absolutely willing that Austria should take advantage of this favourable opportunity, even at the risk of further complication'.[28]

Outside Austria and Serbia, for the first half of July 1914 the crisis was interpreted blandly as another periodic Balkan dispute, which would surely be resolved by a last-minute act of statesmanship. Early German reactions to the assassinations were mostly confined to reports of anti-Serb demonstrations in Vienna and the funeral of, and eulogies to, the dead archduke. Tucked away under the eulogies, questions were being asked in some organs of the German mass media as to whether this regicide might yet 'set alight the powder keg of European armaments'. Since even the most-favoured editor or media baron had no inkling of the contents of the diplomatic messages now heating the wires across Europe, the waves of optimism, indifference and pessimism that surged through the press in the weeks that followed were understandable, even though the impressions formed were often false. French and German papers, which in June had been abusive to the point of warmongering, now took a moderating approach. In Germany and Britain, however, there was no need for any such cooling down. 'It is doubtful if two nations ever went to war', wrote Oron Hale, 'with less preliminary name-calling and combativeness in the press.' With the British press still primarily focussed on Ireland, German coverage of the emerging Balkan crisis was naturally far more extensive, devoting not only the most space but the greatest variety of opinion to the Austro-Serb crisis of any major power. Even pan-Germans were split. Where some (like the totally unknown Hitler) looked forward to Austria-Hungary's disintegration, most argued, like Class in the *Post*, that Germany was honour-bound to aid its ally. Honour-bound perhaps,

but with no enthusiasm. The *Tag* summed up a commonly held belief, questioning how the archduke's successor, an 'inexperienced prince [could] fulfil the heavy task' of holding the empire together. The *National-Zeitung* did not even mourn Franz Ferdinand's death. 'Slavs were Slavs.' That he had 'made the mistake of forgetting'.[29]

Luigi Albertini tells of the Russian foreign minister Sazanov complaining on 25 July that 'apart from the London *Times*, nearly the whole of the British press was on the side of Austria'. Sazanov cannot have *read* the *Times* which, until 16 July, actually took a mildly pro-Austrian line. On that day, it appeared to harden its support of Austria, intervening in a manner which the Austrians and Germans were entitled to regard as an endorsement of their cause. Attacking the Serbs for their 'reckless and provocative language', the *Times* saw this as 'estranging the sympathies of all civilized peoples'. Encouraged by what was really a major blunder by this most famous British journal-of-record, German foreign minister Jagow compounded the problem by using the *Norddeutsche Zeitung* to imply on 19 July that Germany not only expected but also would support Austria in a 'localized' Austro-Serbian war.

> In the utterances of the European press [it] is increasingly recognized that Austria-Hungary's desire to clear up her relations with Serbia is justified. In this connection we share the hope... that a serious crisis will be avoided by the Serbian Government giving way in time. [The] solidarity of Europe... demands and requires that the settlement of differences which may arise between Austria-Hungary and Serbia should remain localized.[30]

Jagow claimed his notice was deliberately written 'in a mild form with an eye to European diplomacy' so as not to 'give alarm prematurely'. It had the reverse effect. From this point Imanuel Geiss notes, 'French diplomacy began to be more seriously concerned with the prospect of a possible crisis' and British statesmen began to realize that Ireland was not their only problem. By making Europe's peace *conditional* on the 'localization' of an Austro-Serb conflict, Jagow offered the first hint that a major European war might be on any national agenda.[31]

Jagow was not even receiving universal support for his stand at home, certainly not from the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, which, on 20 July, published what the *Times* called a 'remarkable article on the Austro-Servian conflict'. This contained a clear warning to 'the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Office of the folly of its campaign against Servia', which read in part.

> On July 11, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Office announced that its Minister at Belgrade had requested the Serbian Government to conduct on Serbian soil an inquiry into the Sarajevo crime. The announcement was false... Until something is known, no attempt should be made to secure from public opinion a blank power of attorney in favour of the

> Vienna Government, especially as the wisdom of Viennese policy is by no means above suspicion.[32]

In urging caution, the left-liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* was inadvertently taking sides with its ideological enemies at both extremes of the political spectrum. Pan-German as well as Socialist papers were suspicious of the aims of Austrian diplomacy, with pan-Germans in the vanguard of those doubting Austria's capacity to wage war. Otherwise, across a vista of bourgeois opinion, consensus ruled. A major war was widely deemed unlikely. As late as 23 July – the day Austria handed Serbia a list of its demands – one Socialist paper still maintained 'there can be no discussion now of a serious danger of war'.[33]

After the Austrian note was delivered, the press mood turned sombre. With clashes on the Austro-Serb border rumoured, the *Post* – which had previously led the calls for pre-emptive strikes against Russia and France – was anxious now about Germany being dragged into a war whose timing was not of its choosing, but of Austria's. Was Austria a fit partner with whom to wage war? In the last Balkan war, the Habsburg empire had shown 'proof of her weakness [and] affirmed that she would make sacrifices in favour of peace. Can we believe that now, while she imposes on European peace at this moment the most severe of tests?'

> If it is true, in fact, that the Austrian government has acted entirely on its own responsibility and neglected contacting Berlin on a question of extreme importance to the whole European situation, then responsibility for its act which this time, in truth, leaves nothing more to be desired in the matter of energy, rests with [Austria] alone. Austria-Hungary is acting independently? Good. Let her act independently. We can wait.[34]

The *Post* was shooting in the dark; unaware of the encouragement and support the Kaiser and his statesmen were actually offering their kinfolk. The pacifistic *Vorwärts* was naturally no better informed than the pan-German organ. It objected to war – any war – on ideological grounds, drawing a graphic picture of the 'unemployed men, widowed women, and orphaned children' who would be war's victims. In the 'name of humanity and culture', it demanded 'a flaming protest against the criminal actions of these warmongers'. 'Not one drop of blood from a German soldier shall be sacrificed for power-hungry Austrian rulers and imperialistic profit interests.'[35]

On 24 July, the still hawkish and unrelentingly anti-Russian *Berliner Tageblatt* expressed satisfaction with Austria's decision 'to attack the wasp's nest [with] all necessary energy'. For the *Kölnische Zeitung*, Austria's note was thoroughly reasonable, being 'nothing more than every civilized state can demand'. Serbia's rejection of just *one* minor demand (and acceptance of all others) impelled the *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* to lead on 26 July with 'Serbia Chooses War'. The *Kreuz-Zeitung* argued that Germany either support Austria or risk 'becoming

a part of the larger Russian colossus, with its barbarism'. Although the 'storm from the East and the West will be enormous', the German Army would 'shine through. A single pulse will run through every German's veins.' On 26 July, the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* typified bourgeois opinion.

> [The] German press displays an almost united front…The chances of peace are almost everywhere perceived to be small, and thus the question of the localization of the war is in everyone's mind. All answer this [with] a declaration of our willingness to stand by our ally with our full power, if Russia should feel compelled to intervene.[36]

Facing the abyss, the German press now held little hope that a general European war might be avoided. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg was by now regretting his peremptory rejection of an offer by Grey for a four-power conference. With localization unravelling, Hollweg cynically asked Grey to 'work energetically' in Paris and St Petersburg to bring about 'the cessation of French and Russian war preparations'. Advised by his undersecretary of state that 'Berlin is playing with us', Grey dismissed Hollweg's request out of hand, rejecting in the same breath the idea that the British 'should bind ourselves to neutrality'. Britain would never strike 'a bargain with Germany at the expense of France', or repudiate 'the neutrality of Belgium'.[37]

On 27 July, the *Norddeutsche Zeitung* devoted a 'Special Edition' to the outbreak of 'War between Austria and Serbia'. As though to imply that the continental Entente powers were in no position to wage war, it entered into the realm of creative fiction by reporting St Petersburg 'in the grip of a frightful strike'. The French Army was supposed to be 'without horses, without boots and without heavy artillery', while at least '300,000 revolutionaries' were harbouring in Paris. The first shots in what became the Great War were fired on 29 July. Although the *Times* called Austria's declaration of war against Serbia and simultaneous artillery bombardment of Belgrade 'insignificant acts of belligerency', the official German press had begun blaming Russia and Great Britain (but strangely, not France) for the likely failure of 'localization'. 'The wires that now run hot between London, Petersburg and Berlin, carry the destiny of Europe's further cultural development [and] the decision over war and peace in the civilized world.' The *Norddeutsche Zeitung* hoped that 'Europe's will for peace remains stronger' than its 'reluctant interests' in the 'bloody explosions of a Balkan war'. Only then would it demonstrate 'that the word "culture" is not merely a beautiful expression, an empty phrase, but a serious duty, a holy task'.[38]

At 1 p.m. on 30 July, the Kaiser's favourite *Boulevardezeitung*, the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, reported Berlin at the 'height of excitement', its atmosphere 'feverish'. Usually considered to be a regime-friendly semi-official organ, the downmarket *Lokal-Anzeiger* was Germany's leading mass-circulation daily. The fact that it failed to find any enthusiasm for war among the crowds gathering outside 'the great newspapers…avid for news' must be read as significant, as

indeed is the observation that the masses so gathered were discussing 'the situation pessimistically'. It was the people's 'right to know', pleaded the *Vossische Zeitung*, 'if a general war is ready to explode'. The 30th of July was also the date of the ultimate media *faux pas* – if *faux pas* it was – of the crisis. By now, OHL was fine-tuning the timetable for a long-planned two-front war against Russia and France. Germany's statesmen, still uncertain about Britain's intentions (and prodded all the while by OHL), hoped to confirm British neutrality by ensuring Germany was not seen as the aggressor. Thus, the first mobilization order *must* issue from St Petersburg. While the politicians seemed to prevaricate, false news 'of immediate German mobilization' was leaked to the *Lokal-Anzeiger*, where it was 'promoted and distributed in a special issue'. Forced into a denial, the German government ordered the confiscation of all copies of the paper but too late, for they had been sent to all Entente embassies. In St Petersburg the 'news' was taken at face value and prompted the Russian decision to announce a general mobilization. Whether by good luck or shrewd media manipulation, the Germans had what they wanted. Russia could now be presented as the aggressor and the foreign office could begin drafting self-righteous declarations of war on Russia and France.[39]

On 31 July 1914, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* described the 'enormous seriousness [and] frightening peace and quiet' in Frankfurt; a city beset by 'a great fear of the horrible, a fear of what may come'. A day later in Berlin, *Vorwärts* described the 'leaden presentiment of approaching and nameless calamity [weighing] upon the crowd awaiting the latest news'. It described the mood as 'depressed. A few youngsters attempt to arouse an ovation but it peters out dolefully... Two timid bravos were then heard and the crowd dispersed. Spirits were depressed as though by heavy weights.' That same day, the Kaiser reacted to Russia's 'threatening mobilization' and ordered a *Kriegsgefahrzustand*. This was 'not quite a mobilization', but a state of 'readiness for war', entailing a loss of 'social as well as personal liberty', and dispensing with Bismarck's 1874 guarantee of the 'freedom of the press' as well. The *Norddeutsche Zeitung* reported that 'all eyes' in Paris were 'turned towards Berlin from where clarification must follow', and felt that any 'further increase of pessimism' in the French capital 'seems impossible'. By now, the Socialist press had fallen into line. *Vorwärts*, hitherto 'undisguised opponents of the principle of monarchy', now endorsed the Kaiser as 'a firm friend of peace'. Bavarian Social Democrats, confronting 'an historic occurrence' which could 'put into question [the] continuance of the German Reich', resolved that if 'the German people are called to arms, Social Democrats will also defend the Fatherland'.[40]

Duly captioned, Hoffmann's snap of the early August Munich crowd in the Odeonsplatz forms part of a visual archive supporting the idea of a universal outpouring of popular enthusiasm for the Great War. As press reports, already cited and stemming from all sectors of the political spectrum, have tended to show, this was scarcely the case. Not until war was announced did newspapers, which had so far reported apathy or anxiety, begin describing enthusiastic pro-war gatherings.

The 'spirit of 1914' entered the realm of idealized, even mythical 'history'; supposed events to be recalled by struggling regimes and a subservient mass media to shame recalcitrants among the populace whenever war weariness became apparent or morale seemed to weaken. Yet this mythical view of war's outbreak, disputed even at the outset, was occasionally (and at great risk by the 'offending' paper) disputed throughout the war. In 1916 with the Somme battle at its height, the *Berliner Tageblatt*'s Theodor Wolff recalled how the German people received news of the declarations of war, not with joyous outbursts, but with 'heavy hearts'.

> [They] experienced it through sleepless nights as a giant, clutching spectre, and the resolution, with which they embarked, arose not from joy, but a deep feeling of duty. There were still some who spoke of a 'fresh, joyous war', and there were ... a few more [who] marched out into the streets with flags unfurled [and] yelled themselves hoarse in front of the Reich chancellor's Palace.[41]

That ardent newspaper reader, Adolf Hitler, would have been closely monitoring media reports since his arrival in Munich 15 months before. By August 1914, he was surely one of those anticipating with relish the prospect of a 'fresh, joyous war'. On learning that Germany was at war, he was 'tormented' only by the thought he might 'reach the Front too late'. One of Popp's children later described his 'Saint-Vitas dance' at the chance of 'taking part in a war for Germany'. Hitler claimed he 'fell down and thanked heaven from an overflowing heart for granting me the good fortune of being permitted to live at this time'. He petitioned the Bavarian king for the right to join a local regiment, and claimed to have received a positive response 'the very next day'. This war, 'desired by the whole people', would bring to an end 'the general uncertainty. Only thus can it be understood that more than two million German men and boys [*sic*] thronged to the colors for this hardest of all struggles.' Hitler would never fight 'for the Habsburg state, but was ready at any time to die for my people' and a German nation 'fighting for her existence [for] life or death, freedom and future'. Hitler recalled opening the document announcing his acceptance with 'trembling hands ... My joy and gratitude knew no bounds. A few days later I was wearing the tunic, which I was not to doff until six years later.' Anna Popp told a similar story: 'I can still see the young Hitler today, standing before me, how he showed me the card that he had received from the [royal] chancellor, that he would be allowed to serve in the German Army.' Since the Bavarian war ministry was 'authorized only under certain pre-conditions to take on foreign volunteers for the Bavarian armed forces' (pre-conditions unlikely to be met by an untrained water-colourist from upper Austria), how did Hitler come to be accepted? Joachimsthaler puts this down to 'confusion of the first days of mobilization [when] he somehow succeeded in being accepted at one of the volunteer recruiting centres'. Whatever the circumstances, he bade farewell to his hosts on 9 August 1914. Anna Popp described how:

> He took my husband by the hand and said 'If I should be killed, would you please write to my sister, perhaps she'd like to have my few things, if not, you can have them. I am sorry to cause you problems.' He also shook my hand, while I stood there and cried. We all liked him so much. He embraced Peppi and Liesl… turned around and hurried away.[42]

Hitler had to wait until 16 August before being posted to an (*ersatz*) battalion and transferred, at the end of August, to the newly formed List Regiment. With other recruits of little or no military background, only now did he begin a period of fragmented and ill-organized training that lasted an absurdly brief seven weeks.

3

CANNON FODDER

A week before his first experience of battle, Hitler scribbled a hurried note to the Popp family, promising a more descriptive effort as soon as 'we have arrived at our destination'. 'I hope we shall get to England', he added. Newspapers now stressed that England was the principal enemy and London, rather than Paris, the site of the most desired German victory parade. With German papers now advertising special rates for 'field-post subscriptions' (*Feldpostabonnements*), it appeared to be a civilian's patriotic duty to subscribe on behalf of the men at the Front. As a newspaper enthusiast, Hitler was probably as aware of Germany's official version of the war and the associated ideology as most civilians in Cologne or Berlin. While keeping up to date with news from home, he, like most of his comrades, was being painlessly indoctrinated into a patriotic perception of global events beyond their immediate environment.[1]

Global perspectives on the war and selective material from the home front were all there had been since the Battle of the Marne. Sir James Edmonds' admission that the function of an official communiqué was to reveal 'as little as possible' could have been written with the German efforts of September–November 1914 in mind. As yet, there was no such thing as a dispatch by a German war correspondent. Where the French installed a few tame journalists in châteaux and called them 'war correspondents' and the British arranged for celebrity newsmen, like Philip Gibbs, to be accredited as 'official correspondents', the Germans seemed at a loss to know what to do with journalists who wanted to report the war. Civilians and soldiers alike would soon demand more than brief, non-committal and often deliberately misleading official communiqués. As well, in Germany and the Entente powers, proprietors and editors had papers to sell and profit to be made from a public clamouring for war news. Yet in those early days, the German press, led by the governmental *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, was reduced to excerpting dispatches by *enemy* correspondents or reports in neutral newspapers. So often were Dutch papers quoted that the German public might have thought the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, the *Allgemeen Handelsblad* or Amsterdam's *Nieus van den Dag* had battlefield access and exclusive rights to OHL. Finally, the Germans began printing a folksy war correspondence, using 'letters' from the

Front by anonymous soldiers, or reports from 'our wounded'. These described German soldiers as always in 'the best of moods' and depicted 'life in the trenches in the brightest colours'. Wounded men could hardly wait 'to return to the Front as quickly as possible'. Battle was not 'nerve-racking [for] our brave boys' and might even be 'boring'. It seems that the closest many authors of these 'dispatches' came to the Front was an editorial desk in Leipzig or Berlin.

> One would hardly believe how cozy [*gemütlich*] our brave soldiers have made the trenches for themselves... [Their] dugouts are richly padded with straw [and] there is no shortage of wine... Also fresh meat is still available. In good weather, battle days are almost like rest days... Twice daily the field kitchen delivers hot food to us, of an evening [and] in the morning before it becomes bright.[2]

Fresh reinforcements may have been lulled into a false security by such nonsense, but those who had endured battle must have found material of this kind, in A.J. Cummings' words and describing its British equivalent, 'nauseating'. No less nauseating, perhaps, were official communiqués telling of endless advances and massive enemy losses, or of the gaiety and contempt for death with which one's troops carried into battle. Yet, war propaganda has other functions beyond reassuring inexperienced troops, and people on the home front. It must also provide patriotic and ideological reinforcement, encourage hatred and fear of the enemy, augment a people's sense of innate superiority, stress the infallible wisdom and character of their military commanders, proclaim the unquenchable ardour of their troops and, no matter how grim the situation, emphasize an unquestionable capacity to prevail. So effective was *this* propaganda in the Great War that, long after details were forgotten, ideas conveyed by the words of 1914–18 lingered. In spite of the post-1918 disillusionment with the newsprint medium, there was still a residue of false information left over (exploited by none more ably than Hitler) which poisoned relations between peoples, embittered the peace and encouraged ideas that contributed to the second instalment of a 30-year world war.[3]

Hitler was one of few Habsburg subjects to serve in the ranks of the German armed forces in the Great War. When war was announced, most Austrians of military age, including Hitler's former room-mate Häusler, simply returned to their homeland. While doubt attaches to *how* Hitler came to join the List Regiment, there can be no questioning his intensity of commitment. His paranoiac nationalism, allied in his case to a raft of imperialist pan-German convictions and a belief in war as part of the natural order, actually ensured that he was no outsider among the men of the all-volunteer reserve divisions of 1914. Included in their ranks were academics, would-be intellectuals, *artistes manqués* (like Hitler) and of course students, all united in the belief that this long-awaited war would provide them the opportunity to prove themselves, to Fatherland and self. Just as this war would grant Germany the chance to settle accounts with its

ring of hostile enemies and become, in the process, a true world power, so it would allow these war volunteers to break out from the confines of a suffocating bourgeois society whose days now must be numbered. When Hitler wrote of being part of a wave of two million patriots, he had no reason to believe otherwise, or to imagine he was contributing to a myth. This flood was a trickle: Hitler was one of 185,000 men (less than one-third of 1 per cent of the German population) to be accepted for these divisions. Even then, the physical standards demanded cannot have been exacting. In 1914, Hitler looked emaciated, suffered from weak lungs and six months earlier had failed the Austrian Army's medical.[4]

If the most eligible and fit German young men had been either serving or active reservists at the outbreak of war, then scraping the barrel to find an additional 185,000 volunteers would not have been necessary. Indeed the prewar conscription policy meant that by the end of September 1914 the Germans faced a critical manpower shortage, compounded by their venturesome conduct of the war. In a high-risk strategy designed to crush France in weeks, the Germans had mobilized quickly and committed their reserves from the onset. Once these were used and exhausted, the source of fresh, trained men had all but dried up. The proportion of men conscripted in the prewar years explains why this was so. In the words of the Bavarian official history:

> To the detriment of the Fatherland, the most extreme political conclusion – the need to conscript of the last man able to bear weapons – was not drawn. While in France, shortly before the war, 80% of all able-bodied eligible men were enlisted, in Germany only 54% were taken; in 1913 for example, in Bavaria alone, 20,000 able-bodied and eligible young men remained surplus to requirements, and were required to refer themselves to the *Landsturm* or *Ersatzreserve*, where they remained without instruction.[5]

Given that Germany's population was some 60 per cent greater than that of France, an army roughly equal to France's could be mustered by conscripting this comparatively low number of eligible males. The privileged sons of the upper classes (unless they specifically chose otherwise) were routinely exempted, allowing them to complete studies or further professional careers. Also unneeded, albeit for utterly different reasons, were most of the city-bred sons of the working class. 'I prefer a monarchist and religious soldier to a Social Democrat', a former war minister had once notoriously told the Reichstag, 'even if he is not as good a shot.' Political ideology rather than military common sense thus ensured that the typical German conscript in August 1914 was either the son of a landholding peasant or a tenant farmer, since in peacetime only *6 per cent* of those conscripted came from the cities, where almost 40 per cent of the population lived. This militarily untrained mass of eligible young males provided that core of 'enthusiastic young men' who Bernd Hüppauf claims flooded recruiting centres 'in such numbers that the military system was unable to cope'. However, the system fell down not

because it was inundated, rather that the authorities were ill-prepared to recruit *anyone* for a war they thought would be over by Christmas. Yet Hüppauf rightly observes that those who did volunteer were quickly 'turned into cannon fodder'. The men of these volunteer reserve divisions were thrown into what was then the greatest battle in history after less than two months of training.[6]

In mid-1915, shortly after the battle of Neuve Chapelle, a Munich journalist serving in the List Regiment eulogized its achievements, for the Bavarian public, in these terms:

> The exceptional qualities of the 16th Bavarian Infantry Reserve Regiment are acknowledged – not only at the Front in that notorious corner of Flanders – but throughout the whole Bavarian Fatherland. This volunteer regiment is spoken of only with the rarest respect, dating from the moment in those last days of October [1914] when it first won glory for its young battle flags. And when one day our victorious men in field-grey return, then the people of Munich will surely be unstinting with the laurel leaves for the men of 'their "List" Regiment.'[7]

The author of this piece of morale-boosting propaganda, Infanterist Sachse, was, like Hitler, a *Kriegsfreiwillige* (war volunteer). He had, with Hitler, marched out from Munich in October 1914. By the time the regiment was pulled out of Neuve Chapelle, he was, again like Hitler, one of the few such *Kriegsfreiwillige* capable of bearing arms. Serving soldiers are often the last ones to give an objective assessment of their units' worth or achievements. We have no way of telling whether Sachse believed what he was writing, for in truth, whatever 'exceptional qualities' were acknowledged and whatever 'glory' had been won, these had more to do with the magnitude of losses than achievements. Indeed the regiment had been bled white. By April 1915 it had lost two commanders (one killed, one permanently incapacitated) and almost all its original officers – for the most part, killed. More than two-thirds of the original Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and war volunteers were lost – killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner. Six months after its creation, the proud qualification 'volunteer regiment' was no longer applicable. Replacements now came from wherever they could be found; from among previously wounded men, returning to the Front and drafted to whatever regiment most needed them, or fresh-faced untested conscripts.

Without some reinforcement by trained men, a motley assortment of half-trained amateurs, no matter how patriotic, brave and enthusiastic, can only be cannon fodder on a modern battlefield. As much by chance as design, the List Regiment did have a few such soldiers – and most importantly officers – in its ranks, among them a professional army officer, Friedrich (Fritz) Wiedemann, whose association with Hitler would last a quarter of a century. Wiedemann was bitterly disappointed when a broken ankle ruled him out of seeing action with his unit in Lothringen (Lorraine). As he watched comrades departing for the Front,

'tears welled' in his eyes. While still recuperating, he was sent instead to join one of the four regiments now assembling to become the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division in Munich. His first association was with the 17th RIR but he was soon transferred and began a three-year association with the List Regiment. The son of a doctor, Wiedemann came from a 'thoroughly unmilitary family' and caused a household crisis when he announced in 1909 that he 'wanted to become an officer'. Parental approval was only granted on the proviso that he 'faithfully promised to seek to become an officer on the General Staff'. Wiedemann cruised through officer training and in 1910 was posted to the 3rd Bavarian Infantry Regiment at the industrial town of Augsburg. Between 1910 and 1914, he was thoroughly indoctrinated into Bavarian and German patriotism.

> In the Franco-German war of 1870–71 the Bavarians had admittedly gained a certain reputation as brave soldiers, but on the whole had not done all that well compared with their German brothers from Prussia. Thus, it became the ambition of the leading Bavarian soldiers to bring the Bavarian Army, in particular the general staff, to the same heights of training as the Prussian model. By 1914, we were convinced that we in Bavaria had not only succeeded, but also excelled the Prussians in some respects.[8]

At first Wiedemann was pleased to take any posting that offered the possibility 'that this war, after all, might not be concluded without me'. Yet his first experiences of these all-new infantry reserve regiments were depressing. The majority of the junior officers were 'young and old men, who belonged neither to active, scheduled-reserve nor territorial reserve [*Landwehr*] formations, but to the so-called substitute reserves [*Ersatzreservisten*] or older classes of territorial reserves'. Among the volunteers many were 'high-school students', or Germans from abroad who had returned 'on hearing of the declaration of war'. Some had 'put back their birthdays a few years', while others, 'bearded territorial reservists... could have been old enough to be their fathers'. The senior officers offered 'a motley picture'. Elderly reserve officers led most companies and battalions while Colonel Julius List – the regimental commander after whom the List Regiment would take its name – 'had not known active service for years'. 'Active officers, of whom there were only a few among us, would naturally have rather gone into the field with an active troop as we saw these reserve regiments in a dim light.' The quality and quantity of equipment also left much to be desired.

> We had sufficient rifles but at first only a few machine-guns... The field cookers only turned up at the last moment just as the transports to France had begun to load. The field telephones had supposedly been manufactured by a firm in Nuremberg for delivery to the English army and as for helmets... there were none at all. We went into the field wearing the oilcloth caps of the territorial reserve.[9]

Training that might have sufficed for 'men and officers who had previously served [was] completely inadequate for men who had pulled on a uniform for the first time'. Wiedemann never regarded the regiment as other than mediocre and freely admitted that its sole claim to fame was having Hitler in its ranks. Yet he also acknowledged that this ad hoc outfit was well suited to Hitler and he to it. 'It is difficult to say', he stated, 'what Hitler's attitude to the army would have been had he, as a recruit, experienced a full two years compulsory service. He would hardly have made an obedient and docile musketeer.'[10]

The man who would become Hitler's fellow *Meldegänger*, Balthaser Brandmayer – describing himself as 'one of scarcely ten men who actually stood in the field at Hitler's immediate side'– became, he claimed, Hitler's 'inseparable comrade'. Although he was one of the few men to address Hitler by the familiar 'du', Brandmayer was not at Hitler's side during the early months of the war. A reservist in August 1914, he had been content to wait until called, continuing to work in his Bavarian village. A steady stream of young men were departing, seen off by tearful families. 'Children cry after their father. [There are] heart-rending scenes as a father and mother accompany their departing son for the last time to Bruckmühl railway station.' On a foggy November 1914 day 'rich in melancholy', Brandmayer received his call up.

> It was midday... At the entrance to the living room, I found my mother, brothers and sisters weeping. A dark premonition passed through me... Silently my dear mother handed me my call-up papers. 'What must be must be, the Fatherland calls', I said to myself clutching them to me. Moreover, I have to confess that I was inwardly happy; for I wanted to experience the war for myself before, by Christmas 1914, peace could be concluded.[11]

Brandmayer would not see action by Christmas. He trained with a replacement battalion in Munich and was sent to the List Regiment on 6 February 1915, entering the trenches on the 15th. He took part in the counter-attack near Neuve Chapelle in early March but did not meet Hitler until May, after the fighting for Aubers Ridge.

Ernst Schmidt was probably Hitler's closest comrade in the war (Machtan considers their relationship homosexual). Just nine months younger than Hitler, Schmidt was one of the few non-Bavarians in the regiment. In Munich when war was declared, he enlisted on 6 August and was assigned to the List Regiment. Schmidt was beside Hitler when the two swore oaths of loyalty to the Bavarian king and, much as it must have vexed Hitler, to the Austrian emperor.

> On the day of the swearing-in, there was a double-ration of roast pork and potato salad. Hitler told me several times that the festive day remained particularly pleasant in his memory, as he was always hungry. During the war he was known for being always hungry, and could become ill when the food-supply was delayed.[12]

Hitler was not yet a strict vegetarian (how he might have survived as one on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918 is more a question for a dietician than a historian). After the war Schmidt rose through the ranks of the National Sozialialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) and finished the Second World War as mayor of his town. He was not the only one to benefit from Hitler's patronage. Many former Listers – such as the future deputy Führer Rudolf Hess and the Nazi press magnate Max Amman – later enjoyed acclaim above their true station and promotion beyond their true worth.

Not, however, if they wrote books about their experiences with Adolf Hitler in the Great War. Brandmayer's honest confessions of fear, his patent lack of war lust and hints of pacifist beliefs (added to his allusions to Hitler's prudery and repressed sexuality) explain why his book was received coldly by the Nazis and why the Munich branch of the NSDAP *Schrifttumskammer* (literary chamber) had Hitler's name removed from the cover. Yet Brandmayer's problems after 1933 pale in comparison with those of Hans Mend. Mend's *Mit Adolf Hitler im Felde* first appeared in 1931. Often hagiographic in tone and showing signs of sloppy research, Mend's book was nevertheless interspersed with crude if convincing psychological insights, which suggest the author thought Hitler morbid and sexually inhibited. At first it was well received by the Nazis, but there was enough in it, once he became aware of its contents, to draw the ire of the Nazi dictator. So much so that in 1938, by 'agreement of the office of the Führer', the book was withdrawn from sale and orders given that all copies, held by the publisher or libraries, be pulped. Astonishingly, the out of favour Mend then tried to join the NSDAP but was sent to Dachau instead. After his release he was harassed by the Gestapo and even tried and convicted of sexual offences. He died early in the Second World War, possibly from natural causes.[13]

A cavalry reservist, Mend was in hospital at Frankfurt following a 'heavy fall from a horse' when his call-up orders came on 28 July 1914. Declared unfit to travel, he nevertheless set off to join his Uhlan regiment in southern Bavaria, drawn to duty, as he put it, like 'iron filings to a magnet'. He arrived just as the regiment was departing for the Front, whereupon a doctor declared him unfit for active service and sent him to a heavy-cavalry regiment in Munich. During a few miserably 'stressful' weeks, Mend was ostracized (for being a hated Uhlan) and given only the worst nags to ride. Offered the chance to join the List Regiment as dispatch rider, he accepted with glee, bringing along an all-white 'Schimmel' (for which he boasted about having cheated a gypsy horse-trader). Where Wiedemann came to the 6th BRD as a last resort and Brandmayer had no choice, Mend was in his element. 'The regiment consisted mostly of war volunteers', he wrote, 'for the most part students with whom we got on very well. I never heard anyone at any time request treatment based on his previous station in civilian life.'[14]

No one has detailed the training undergone by these raw recruits. Hitler tells of 'donning the uniform in the circle of my dear comrades, turning out for the first time, drilling, etc., until the day came for us to march off'. In camp, the men could only read of their army's glorious military achievements. As the war

entered week two, headlines told of 'Our Victorious Troops in Alsace', 'The Fall of Liège', 'French Thrown-back Near Mülhausen' and 'The Victory near Lagarde'. The French Army in Alsace had been put to rout and the fall of Liège (Lüttich) on the Belgian–German frontier opened the way to Paris itself. Even the *Norddeutsche Zeitung* seemed surprised at the speed of the advance; 'nobody expected that fighting would take place so quickly and so victoriously, for only nine days had passed since mobilization'. 'Nothing can stop the advance of the German troops', it boasted. 'We continue marching on, in the West on a broad front where the enemies of three nationalities congregate together and to the East where likewise three enemies of Germandom have formed an alliance. May others soon follow these victories!' The next day it was able to announce that Alsace–Lorraine had been 'Cleansed of Enemies'. By now Perfidious Albion, not France or Russia, was the principal enemy. Under the headline 'They Can't Win, so They Lie', the *Norddeutsche* complained that 'If it wasn't bitterly serious the war reporting of our enemies would be the stuff of the best satire.' Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* and *Times* were already marked out as the principal 'lie factories of 1914'.[15]

Reacting to the glowing communiqués flowing from OHL, the German press was writing as though the army was irresistible, although most of the material printed was no worse than an embroidered version of the truth. The Allies, on the other hand, were obliged to hide the gravity of the situation by ignoring the progress of the German armies, focussing instead on their enormous losses, and hinting darkly at atrocities committed by sadistic German troops. The Germans justified their admittedly brutal conduct as a necessary reaction to Belgian and French *francs tireurs*, seizing upon instances of sniping at German soldiers by civilians in war zones as proof of the Entente's disastrous situation. On 15 August, German papers carried an official warning. German troops had been 'solemnly instructed to suppress each hostile action on the part of [French] inhabitants by the sharpest measures'. Any non-combatant who 'conducts himself in a war-like manner' would be shot 'immediately and summarily'. German demands on the Belgians were even harsher, since they had not only 'fired on German troops [but] beaten [German] wounded to death in cruel ways and shot down doctors fulfilling their professional duties'. In (as yet) unoccupied Antwerp, a Belgian 'rabble' had 'devastated German property in a barbaric manner [and] butchered [German] women and children in beastly ways'. If henceforth the war 'took on a cruel character, Belgium carries the blame'.[16]

With the Allies offering wild rumours or fabrication as 'proof' of the beastliness of the German soldier, the Germans sought to respond in kind, but their task was made difficult by the fact that only tiny slivers of Reich territory experienced the presence of enemy troops. They were obliged to take a reverse tack, in which the civilian victim of Allied propaganda became the monster incarnate of German. In strange tales of civilian sadism against *fully armed soldiers*, the Bavarian press (according to Hellmuth von Gerlach) was the most creative. Hitler and his comrades could read of a Württemburg dragoon who had had his 'eyes plucked

out, his hands hacked off and his tongue ripped out'; of an Uhlan, who had 'both eyes put out, both arms hacked off, and was left to die, fully conscious'; or of a corporal from Augsburg, who was 'found in a Belgian house with his legs hacked off'. Tales of *francs tireurs*, sadistic priests, out-of-control nuns, evil geriatrics and diabolical children did little to dampen the enthusiasm of the men of the List Regiment, who were preoccupied, according to Hitler, by the question 'would we not reach the Front too late?' The fall of Brussels made this seem likely. The *Deutschen Tageszeitung* cited a 'laconic report from the General Staff', which suggested that such 'rapid success' was not even 'hoped for by the most confident among us'. The *Post* wrote of the 'jubilation' this news must 'trigger in our Fatherland'. It was high time, the pan-German organ reasoned, for the Belgian Army to 'lay down its weapons'.[17]

By now, propaganda and counter-propaganda was beginning to displace war news, which, as censorship became more efficient, was harder to come by. The Allies quickly took the initiative. They re-coined *Boches* and added *Huns* for good measure, then set about demonizing the Kaiser, the Prussian military caste and the whole German people. Germans were outraged. From London, a *Berliner Tageblatt* 'correspondent' sneaked out an account of the frenzy anti-German propaganda was creating. 'The word, on every street corner and in every Englishman's mouth was "mad dop" [*sic*]. Mad dog! Der tolle Hund – that was Germany!'

> On the street corner reigns the Terror of the Yellow Press. The serious newspapers 'Telegraph', 'News' continue to exhort calm at first, the one in the morning, the other in the evening. Between morning and evening however, every five minutes the newspaper boys announce new and newer editions of the two, three most popular halfpenny papers, which even in times of peace had been making business exclusively out of scandal.[18]

Even before he received his kit, Hitler would have been aware of the Allied propaganda war against Germany. A dogmatic and inflexible man, he was only too willing to believe whatever reinforced or accorded with his prejudices. By late August German papers were gloating over how Parisians, in the last week of August, were deprived of any knowledge as to where the Germans were. In truth, their papers either had the *Boche* on his last legs in Alsace, or raping, pillaging, cutting the hands off children and climbing over mountains of his own dead in Belgium. Then suddenly he was at the gates of Paris! By now Germans could read about what Parisians could see; the influx of 'thousands upon thousands' of refugees from the North. These were soon joined by Parisians from the more exclusive Paris suburbs where 'an endless rank and file of overloaded automobiles with elegant passengers stream out. They move in a break-neck flight in the direction of southern France.' And then the first shots in what became the Battle of the Marne were fired on 9 September. The Germans were driven back across

the Marne and four days later across the Aisne, a total withdrawal of 60 miles. This reversed the trend of the war.[19]

Throughout September, the Germans still continued to write as though the war would be over at any moment: German troops were said to be still 'determined to celebrate Sedan day in Paris', and were thus spurred on 'by even the tiniest victory'. Even so, the boastful tone had begun to moderate. Now it became the German Army's turn to issue meaningless or mendacious communiqués and, through the dribble of information passed on, ensure that the press revealed no unpalatable realities. If the Marne battle was alluded to, it was not mentioned as a defeat at all, but smothered in comforting words that suggested all was going according to the plan. Instead of hard news, the German public was now informed about 'The Flight [of refugees] Before the Uhlans', the 'The Marching-performance of the Germans' or 'New Confirmation of French use of Dumdum Bullets'. England's 'ridiculous' army was lampooned, as was an asinine attempt by the *Times* to 'prove' the English were not, after all, Teutons, but a 'Latin race'. Even so, the *Berliner Tageblatt* was calling the kettle black when it accused the British of delaying 'news about their army'. By 14 September, with the Battle of the Marne lost, German papers wrote of the 'Favourable Position of the Battle near Paris'. The Allies now claimed the war was all but won.

> The latest reports state that the rout of the Germans is deepening into complete disaster.
>
> The invaders are turning homewards, via St. Quentin and Mezieres, which are on the line from Amiens to Sedan...
>
> Officers from the Front believe that the Germans will be unable to retreat along the lines of their advance, and will be forced to go by way of Luxembourg.[20]

While the Yellow Press continued to insist that the war would be over by Christmas, serious papers on both sides took note of Lord Kitchener's warning of a war 'of three years'. The Germans were now settling down for a long war, if not quite the seven-year war expected by Bernhardi and certainly not the decades-long war mournfully predicted by the *Times*. The *Berliner Tageblatt* ridiculed the latter's claim that 'no matter what happens in the West, Russia and we will continue the war, if necessary for twenty years'. 'With what feelings must the French have read this big-mouthing by an English braggart.' Cut off from Europe by 25 miles of sea, England was 'far from the suffering of war!' For the French, 20 years was 'a long time when an enemy army stood in the middle of the land!'[21]

For Hitler and his comrades, the lack of a decision near Paris and clear hints in the press that the fighting was moving away from the French capital meant that they would surely see action. Meanwhile, on what was now called the Western Front, trench warfare 1914–18 style was coming into being. After the Marne–Aisne battles, the Allies sought to outflank German defensive positions while the Germans responded in mirror-like form. The result was a series of outflanking manoeuvres,

with the troops digging in as they went. By October, the opposing forces were seeking to consolidate themselves in trenches that would soon zigzag all the way from the Franco-Swiss border to Nieuport on the English Channel. For all but the cavalry, the idea of a 'Race to the Sea' depends on hindsight. Infantrymen, alternatively fighting, digging or labouring, had little sense of taking part in a war of movement. With censorship now in place for the duration, the 'Race' was presented as a confusing series of unrelated battles hundreds of miles apart; in which the Germans were capturing more than their share of high ground and prime sites.[22]

'Antwerp has fallen', the *Figaro* noted, almost in passing, on 11 October. The fall of Lille, a few days later, was treated even more off-handedly. The French communiqué of 14 October, at the bottom of a column headlined 'Noteworthy Progress', did its best to disguise a devastating blow to the French Army's morale and a critical strike at France's economy.

> On our left wing, our forces resumed the offensive in the regions of Hazebrouck and Béthune against enemy elements for the most part composed of cavalry coming from the Front Bailleul-Estaires-La Bassée.
>
> The city of Lille, held by a territorial detachment, was attacked and occupied by a German Army corps.[23]

The capture of such a prize, following so close on the heels of Antwerp, brought celebration and a resurgence of optimism in Germany. Under banner headlines, German papers carried the news that 'Lille has been occupied by us, four thousand five hundred prisoners have been taken', as well as the untrue claim that the city 'suffered no damage from its capture by our troops'.[24]

Meanwhile, in the real war on the Western Front, the forces on both sides were settling in for a war in which the French Army, then 15 times larger than the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), would be Germany's principal enemy until 1917. Despite this, in the propaganda war within a war, Germany's civilians and soldiers were asked to find exceptional reserves of hatred not for France but for England and all England stood for. Hatred yes, but not contempt, for the English racial cousins were also to be feared and treated as especially dangerous. As fellow Teutons, their blood heritage suggested they could be the most redoubtable and inventive of enemies. But only if they cared to see the war out, for there were signs – according to German newspapers – that venal English businessmen were losing interest and that the British public was becoming disillusioned by the unscrupulousness of their statesmen.

> The London public, whose political education has been enriched by the consideration of war as a commercial undertaking [is] peeved. War news is failing to materialize, there is no news at all, and thus a lack of

all assets on which the London businessman would be able to stake his self-interest.[25]

By now, no one was writing as though the war would be over by Christmas. With nothing of value issuing from OHL, German papers had to take the line that it was 'inappropriate at the moment' to say other 'than that our prospects are good'. In fact, the Marne and Aisne had left German strategy in tatters, even if the army was enjoying some spectacular successes. Near Lille the Germans had 'gone over to the offensive' and thrown 'the enemy back in many positions. Some two thousand Englishmen were taken prisoner and many machineguns captured.' Some of the first shots in what was soon called 'the greatest battle in the world' had already been fired; a battle that would be called Langemarck by the Germans and First Ypres by the British. Ypres (Ypern or Ieper), an ancient Flemish weaving town, was a British-held obstacle blocking the German path to the channel ports. As the *Times* observed, the coming 'attack in the north is for the moment Germany's last effort in the West'. If Calais, Boulogne and Dunkirk were captured, the Germans would have a military and naval presence 25 miles from Dover. How then could the British maintain an expeditionary force of at least a million men in France and Belgium? Could England itself face invasion? Then, as in 1940–41, British fear of a cross-Channel German landing was tangible, but its difficulties were underestimated. 'Now that the war is reaching the climax of its violence', the *Times* warned, the British must face the prospect of the landing of 'an expedition in England for the purpose of compelling us to sign a disastrous peace'.[26]

On 8 October, the men of the List Regiment, enjoying their dinner of roast pork and potato salad, were in no doubt as to what this sudden burst of largesse implied. Where at the Front they might finish – or even which Front – no one, including their officers, knew. Few men had fired more than a magazine of bullets; they had been issued with rifles only a few days before. It was now that Mend first became aware of Hitler. He claimed to be immediately struck 'by his energetic look and special character' and took him for 'an academic, of whom there were so many in the "List" Regiment'. Yet he also sensed something odd: 'I saw him for the second time on another day, as he pottered about with his rifle. He regarded it with the delight of a woman with her jewellery, while I secretly laughed to myself.'[27]

On Saturday, 10 October, the men marched out of Munich's Lechfeld barracks for the last time. The marching columns 'passed along the Landsbergerstrasse in the direction of Pasing' accompanied by 'cheers and garlands of flowers from the people of Munich... Waves and farewells, a handshake and last embrace, flags waved and flowers thrown from windows and balconies – and between times tears, tears and more tears'. More than tears flowed that day. Hitler complained of being on his feet 'from 6.30 a.m. until 5 p.m.... all in pouring rain'. There was no let-up. Shortly after daybreak, the men were 'on the move again, all of us dog-tired', and spent the night under open skies, in the 'freezing cold'. On Monday,

12 October, they marched through a prisoner-of-war camp housing French 'shock troops captured at the beginning of the campaign'. 'They all gaped at us', Hitler wrote. 'Dead tired though we were we marched past them smartly. They were the first French I ever saw.' A further week of 'night marches of up to 42 kilometres [was] followed by brigade manoeuvres' in the Bavarian countryside until finally, on the night of 20–21 October, the men entrained. 'We are going on a 4 days train journey', Hitler wrote, 'probably to Belgium. I am tremendously excited.'[28]

Mend, Hitler and Franz Rubenhauer – an officer who later provided much of the material for the regimental official history – described the train journey north in similar terms. At each stop as they crawled through Bavaria, they were met by cheering crowds, waving the black and yellow flag of Munich, the white and blue flag of Bavaria, and the black, white and red flag of the German Empire. A few spectators squeezed onto the train, draping soldiers 'with garlands of flowers'. Even when they left Bavaria the popular enthusiasm continued. Stations all along the route were filled with people, who 'shouted hearty farewell greetings and best wishes': some even sought to press 'handfuls of money onto the soldiers'. Thirty years later Hitler still remembered the impression made by the sight of the Rhine and the welcome by the people.

> I saw the Rhine for the first time in 1914, when I was on my way to the Western Front. The feelings which the sight of this historic stream inspired in me remain forever graven on my heart. The kindness and spontaneity of the Rhinelanders also made a profound impression on me; everywhere they received us and fêted us in a most touching manner.[29]

One midnight in late October, they passed over the Rhine bridge near Mainz. On the train 'all the windows suddenly opened, and while waving the national cloths and flags, from the depths of a thousand young throats there roared as a rushing stream: '«*Lieb Vaterland magst ruhig sein, fest steht und treu die Wacht am Rhein*!»'. As they crossed the German frontier, the expressions on 'the faces of the Belgian people' were all Mend needed to realize that 'we were now in an enemy land'. There were other, more tangible, signs of their entry into a war zone. 'Before and around Liège the first traces of war became evident, burnt-out houses, torn-up roads, trees shot through.' Hitler, the 'poor observer', seemed oblivious to the plight of the Belgian people and unmoved by the destruction around him.

> [We] crossed into Belgium at 10 p.m. As we left Aachen, we were given an enthusiastic send off by thousands of people, and much the same thing happened throughout our journey. At 9 a.m., we arrived at Liège. The railway station was badly damaged. The traffic was tremendous. Army transport only, of course. At midnight, we arrived at Louvain. The whole town is a heap of rubble.[30]

The 'heap of rubble' in question had recently been one of the finest and most beautiful of Europe's university towns. And then, after four days of confinement in cattle wagons, the troops at last reached Brussels. Here they hoped to stretch out and grab some much-needed rest in the primitive huts awaiting them. Their officers told them that in the morning they would be departing for a period of training and orientation, learning the Western Front ropes in backwaters or on the sea coast near Ostend. To the surprise of officers and men alike, they were immediately ordered to entrain. They now knew where they were going, 'in the direction of Lille!' With that news, wrote Rubenhauer, 'came new perspectives, which were all called "Ypres!"'

> On the morning of 23 October between 7 and 9 o'clock, our troops arrived in Lille...There had been lengthy delays. For long hours the trains stood immobile at open stretches, then crawled forward from station to station at a snail's pace of 8 kilometres per hour.
>
> After a few hours as Lille approached, unbroken cannon-fire was heard, in the Westerly direction of Armentières fliers were seen circling in the brightly illuminated evening sky – one already felt the vicinity of the Front.[31]

Hitler described the journey as going 'fairly well and peacefully' until Tournai. Then there was 'nothing but trouble. In some places, the rails had been prized loose despite the closest watch.' Elsewhere they were delayed by 'blown-up bridges and smashed railway engines. Although our train was moving at a snail's pace, we kept grinding to a halt more and more often. From these stops, we could hear the monotonous roar of our heavy mortars.'[32]

After a 61-hour crawl across Belgium, the division – 'burning with impatience to get to the Front' – finally arrived at Lille, where it was incorporated as part of Sixth Army Reserve and placed on alert. The men were granted three days leave, time for opinions to be formed on this first encounter with occupied France. Reminders of the war were omnipresent; 'in Lille the roar of cannon seemed to be endless', Hitler wrote. After just a few hours, his francophobia and preoccupation with cleanliness doubtless coloured the observation that Lille was a 'typical French town' (despite never having seen one) which was 'all dirty if you scratch under the surface'. It was not to be compared with prim and proper German towns, as he was reminded 'time and again'. Befitting a city that had recently been subjected to artillery bombardment, Lille was understandably 'dirty' and littered with the detritus of war. Here and there ruined streetcars 'that must have been shot up before the occupation could be seen still smoldering, being now no more than heaps of rubbish'. At this time, Mend claims to have further satisfied his curiosity about Hitler, in whom he saw the reincarnation of a *Landsknecht* (mercenary soldier of the Sixteenth to Seventeenth centuries): 'As an active server', he wrote, 'I recognized the born soldier in him straight away.' As did another NCO, who had known Hitler rather longer.

> 'Yes, I know him well, he is actually an Austrian and a fine chap...', and to my question why an Austrian was serving with a Bavarian regiment, he gave me this answer: 'As far as I know, he must have reported to the Austrian consulate on mobilization, but at the same time he went to King Ludwig; the King gave him his personal permission to serve in a Bavarian regiment.'[33]

As for the inhabitants, Rubenhauer thought them 'shy' at first, but 'increasingly friendly and [making] no secret of their surprise that our soldiers always conducted themselves impeccably'. He found 'absolutely no hostility, they were rather well disposed'. Mend too found 'that there was absolutely no hostility', particularly not among 'the beautiful young ladies of Lille [who] especially understood [how] to flirt with German boys'. When he asked the 'daughter of a burgher of Lille why she was not angry with the German soldiers, she gave me the answer: '*J'aime bien les soldats allemans* [*sic*]. *Vous savez Monsieur, dans l'amour il y a pas patrie*.' (I like German soldiers very much. You know sir, in love there is no motherland.) Indeed, if the Bavarians are to be believed, they were greeted – if not exactly with open arms – with friendliness and hospitality. 'It was surprising', one Lister wrote, 'especially in the coffee-houses, how quickly a bond was struck between the upper Bavarians and the French – especially if one could "talk" with his hands.'

> French 'cafetiers' seemed to be especially able mind readers, for they always placed, wholly on their own initiative, something drinkable on the table as soon as a group of soldiers arrived. For the most part they did the right thing in respect of the drinks supplied and in a similarly matter-of-fact manner with the bill. Only when it came to food did the Frenchmen have difficulties...For the most part – because there wasn't any.[34]

Not all of their time was spent drinking or carousing. The troops had barely settled in when they were ordered to make themselves ready and assemble with other Bavarian troops in the *Place de Concert* for an honour parade. Taking the salute would be the Bavarian king, Ludwig III, while leading the march past would be his son, Rupprecht, the Bavarian crown prince and commander-in-chief of the (German) Sixth Army.

> The king is coming and at his side his son, the glorious victor of Metz. The royal greeting is answered with a 'Good morning Your Majesty'. Father and son inspect the serried ranks; the band plays the Bavarian royal hymn. Certainly for all present an unforgettable moment!...
>
> The troops assemble and the Crown Prince leads the brave Bavarians in parade-step past his father...

> Even the French follow the marching troops with admiring glances – certainly the people of Lille are ahead of the Parisians, for they know that the reports in French journals about barbarian hordes are miserable lies.[35]

The men from Munich were in no doubt now that theirs would be a brutal initiation into Western Front fighting. The rumble of heavy guns and flashes on the horizon at night were from 20 miles away, at Ypres, where a battle was under way, which newspapers described as a 'fight for life and death' for the German people. 'On the 27th at 1 a.m.', Hitler wrote, 'the alarm was sounded, at 2 a.m. all of us marched out'. The regiment mustered in the *Place de Concert*, where an 'Order by the Bavarian crown prince against the Englishman' was read out.

> We have now the fortune to have the Englishmen on our front, the troops of that people whose antagonism has been at work for so many years in order to surround us with a ring of enemies and strangle us. We have to thank them above all for this bloody, terrible war... [When] you meet up with this enemy, [show] them that the Germans cannot be swept so lightly from world history, show them through German blows of a quite special kind. Here is the enemy who stands most in the way of the restoration of peace. Onwards! Onwards![36]

An exhausting 25-mile march carrying full pack and equipment followed, during which the sounds of the big guns of Ypres grew louder and were joined, towards the end of the march, by the clatter of small arms. They spent that night in reserve and the next day marched to the Front.

4

WEST FLANDERS 1914

> Impossible they say? – Nothing is impossible! We are soldiers and must be able to die! . . .
>
> – 54th Reserve Division Goc, 30 October 1914[1]

> The English are already surrounded on three sides; we'll now close off the fourth, and with that the war will be over!
>
> – Major Herrgott, 6th BRD Staff, 30 October 1914[2]

Since it lasted a month, the battle (or more properly 'campaign') known to the British as First Ypres and to the Germans, misleadingly and for publicity reasons, as Langemarck seems more like a logical, if scaled-down, forerunner of the great attritional Western Front campaigns of 1916–17 than does any of the classic two-day battles of the Napoleonic era. Yet for those accustomed to reading of the Western Front battles of 1916 and 1917, the first battle for Ypres is scarcely recognizable as a Great War battle at all. In the first place, it was no slugfest dominated by artillery with attacking troops constantly thrown at near impregnable position. The trenches of 1914 were hastily constructed, largely improvised and puny compared with post-1915 structures, and often changed hands in the fighting. As for the artillery, both sides were hamstrung by a shortage of still-serviceable guns and stockpiles of shells that were almost exhausted. In fact, First Ypres was the final act of the war of movement of 1914, forming, in the words of the British official history, 'the continuation and final phase of the "Race to the Sea"', a race in which 'the Allies "were always twenty-four hours and an army corps behind the enemy"'.[3]

While neither side could honestly claim victory from First Ypres, this did not stop either from claiming one. Since both sides went into the fighting with aggressive intentions, this fact alone further demarcates it from the ghastly attritional campaigns of the middle period of the war. In these, as is only too well known, one side invariably sought, either by design or by compromise once hopes of a breakthrough were abandoned, to 'wear down' the other by attacking his strongpoints. That this only succeeded in wearing out the attacking

forces at a greater rate than it did the defenders is what gives the war on the Western Front its most ghastly and pointless character. Yet hindsight was not available to the men of 1914 or their commanders. Then the war was still being fought with the aim of a decisive breakthrough. In the case of the Allies, an advance eastward from Ypres was planned with the aim of splitting the German forces. Once this was accomplished, the French and British armies were to wheel south-east, force a crossing at the Lys, attack the retreating German flanks and in general, render the German position in Flanders so untenable as to force them to evacuate Lille and the Belgium Channel ports. Nothing like this happened, but the German plan was also over-ambitious and probably just as unachievable.[4]

A claim by Robin Neillands that the German commander, Erich von Falkenhayn, was seeking to 'attempt a re-run of the Schlieffen Plan' is not sustainable. Falkenhayn was fully aware of his lack of resources and the questionable quality of the human material available to him, and a rerun of the failed Schlieffen Plan with a fraction of the resources was the last thing on his mind. However, he still hoped that the war might be brought to a favourable conclusion with something far less ambitious. Ypres was the clue – a town that the Germans had actually entered in the first days of October. If he could recapture this ancient centre of Flemish culture, German forces would be poised to threaten, and even capture, one or more of the French Channel ports of Dunkirk, Boulogne and Calais, leaving the BEF in an unsustainable situation. Like many Germans, Falkenhayn thought that Britain's heart was not in this war. Should the BEF's lifeline in France be threatened or blocked, he believed England would evacuate its army, leaving Germany with a single, outnumbered and industrially inferior enemy in Western Europe. It was a gamble, since Falkenhayn knew that in the vain drive to capture Paris and knock France out of the war, the Germans had pushed their regular troops and reserves to the limit. With the invasion force of August 1914 already an exhausted shadow of its former self, Falkenhayn placed his hopes in troops which, according to the German official history, left 'those responsible for the training of the young reserve corps... filled with anxiety about their creation'.

> Would they be equal to the frightful demands of perhaps a weeklong fight against a battle-tested and brave enemy? Would their offensive will for victory be taken away from them by the awesome effects of modern weapons? This question, which for one and a half months had been asked and decided in favour of the weapons, had here to find a final and momentous reply.[5]

In terms of actual military achievement, the reply to this would be in the negative. These raw troops sometimes fought bravely and with fanatical self-sacrifice. While it is true that their leaders were sometimes barely competent, this alone is no cause for their ultimate failure. Time after time these *Kriegsfreiwillige* (war volunteers) showed themselves to be deficient in battlefield know-how and

possessed of a near suicidal willingness to put their lives, uselessly, in jeopardy. In the end, the main contribution of the reservists killed and maimed in the so-called *Kindermord* (murder of the innocents) of 1914 was the media-inspired legend, or myth, of Langemarck – a battle that had actually been fought in the earlier phase of First Ypres and by regular troops at that. The reservists had been cut down in their masses in fighting three weeks after the real battle of Langemarck. But myth and legend hardly depend on accurate dates.

First Ypres was in two parts, punctuated by a brief pause during which the antagonists regrouped. It might be likened to the final two rounds of a prizefight between two evenly matched, battered, but still resilient boxers. In the penultimate round both were able to deliver heavy punishment without forcing a decisive points breakthrough. All hinged therefore on the last round, with each seeking at least a points victory or even a decisive knockout. With the List Regiment still involved in training exercises in Bavaria, the Flanders campaign of 1914 began on 12 October 1914, with a British advance 'between La Bassée and Armentières'. Aimed towards Ypres (which had been in German hands since 3 October), this was 'quickly checked by the Bavarians, who in turn were stopped by superior British rifle, machine-gun, and artillery fire'. The subsequent lull in operations was broken by a German infantry attack, with spasmodic artillery support, near Langemarck on 20–21 October. This was repulsed. On 23 October, 'after two days of hand-to-hand fighting', 1,500 German bodies 'were counted on the battlefield'.[6]

A German communiqué of 22 October had noted how 'in the direction of Ypres our troops advanced successfully': in 'very bitter' fighting, the enemy was 'falling back slowly across the whole front'. This impression was reinforced by a communiqué on 23 October describing *all* German attacks west of Lille as 'successful'. 'We are in occupation of more districts. On the rest of the Western Front, quietness reigns.' The men of the List Regiment may have been lulled into a sense of security by such comments. Even so, as they trudged towards Ypres, some must also have wondered about their lack of training, the fact that many had fired only a few practice rounds, and that the regiment was led by inexperienced and mostly over-age officers. Falkenhayn, their commander-in-chief, while praising their 'incomparable enthusiasm and unexcelled heroism', well understood their inadequacies.

> The disadvantages of their urgent and hasty formation and training, and the fact that they were led by older and for the most part retired officers, as others were not to be had, naturally made themselves felt. In particular there were deficiencies in the new field-artillery formations, a fact that was emphasized all the more strongly by the shortage of ammunition. Nor was the leadership entirely satisfactory.[7]

Falkenhayn was here describing the patchy state of the German Army a bare two months into the First World War. If Germany had all but won the war as the

propaganda proclaimed, why were the services of such troops needed? In reality, as Robert B. Asprey notes, Falkenhayn had 'inherited a hideous situation' from the broken man he had just replaced at the head of OHL, General Count Helmut von Moltke (the younger). The Marne had been a 'disaster for German arms' but its secret was so well kept that leading members of the Reichstag were unaware of it. Even Bernhardi knew 'nothing of the importance of the Marne battle', only that 'a few units had to fall back to reorganize'. He concluded, 'nothing from the reports and grew all the more confident as the magnificent achievements in the East surmounted all our expectations'. If Bernhardi was in the dark, how much could the man in street or the ordinary soldier have known? The official line was that the Marne was a German victory. Contrary reports were described as 'seditious propaganda'. In order to hide the true situation, OHL refused to total casualty figures and posted only ones specific to towns and villages. Nevertheless, those near the Front or tending the wounded knew that hospitals in Germany and the occupied lands were filled with the wounded. Soldiers near the Front had also seen how their 'dead covered the fields of France' and knew that 'tons of materiel and guns had been lost'.[8]

In October 1914, Falkenhayn was at the head of a depleted German Army. Because of the swift advance in August and 'the many fierce battles' fought, reinforcements 'could not arrive quickly enough. There was everywhere a shortage of junior officers in their ranks that could not be immediately filled.'

> *Matériel* was urgently in need of replenishment. The spectre of the shortage of munitions was already apparent... The Ministry of War had done everything possible during the last years before the war, according to the views current at that time, to meet the demands of the General Staff. Consumption, however, exceeded peacetime estimates many times over, and was on the increase.[9]

Although Germany's enemies were also depleted, their combined industrial superiority augured better for their chances of making up for *matériel* losses. As for manpower, the situation was more complex. Germany was now paying for the decisions to conscript only half of those eligible for service in peacetime and for having rushed freshly mobilized trained reservists into battle in the first weeks of the war. OHL's fear of polluting their army with Socialists from among the ranks of the urban proletariat was not echoed in France, which conscripted some 80 per cent of its eligible young men. Thus, despite a population exceeding France's by some 60 per cent, at the start of war Germany mustered a trained army (regular and reservist) hardly greater than that of a neighbour that did not have to fight a war on two fronts and could count on the support of 12 Belgian and British divisions. The Schlieffen-based decision to commit reserves at the start *might* have been the masterstroke that knocked France out of the war in six weeks. Instead, it became a high-risk gamble that failed due to misreadings of the battlefield situation, the tiredness of the men, the resourcefulness and

will of the Allied commanders Joffre and Galliéni, and the resoluteness of Franco-British troops.

During that leapfrogging movement and counter-movement towards the English Channel that followed the battles of the Marne/Aisne, the Germans drew first blood when they entered Ypres on 3 October. On 10 October, the day their first cavalry unit entered Lille, the German Fourth Army was ordered 'to cut off the fortresses of Dunkirk and Calais'. Between 10 and 13 October, 5,000 German shells were also poured into Lille, which surrendered on 13 October. The Allies were having the occasional success as well, as with the British capture of Bailleul on 14 October. But these successes were few and far apart. On 15 October, the Germans reached the North Sea at Ostend. The *Times* sought to minimize the seriousness of this loss with flippancy, suggesting that the Digue at Ostend offered the Germans little more than 'an excellent place for practicing the goose-step'. Since the Allied line now extended 'from Ypres to the sea', it was announcing victory of a kind in the 'Race to the Sea'.[10]

On 18 October, the Germans suffered a major reverse when the British recaptured Ypres. Given its strategic importance, it was no surprise for the British to learn from reports by aviators and Belgian refugees that massive numbers of German troops were moving in to the town. On 21 October, Sir John French told Lord Kitchener that 'the enemy are vigorously playing their last card' and added simply, 'they will fail'. For Falkenhayn, the coming battle represented his first serious test. The loss of Ypres had been a blow to his plans, and he could only hope that his willing but inexperienced reinforcements would suffice for one last, brutal attempt to retake Ypres and clear the way to the Channel ports. His desperation to succeed at was compounded by the knowledge that the chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and Falkenhayn's own sacked predecessor, Moltke, were seeking to undermine him. The embittered Moltke even warned the Kaiser that Falkenhayn did not 'possess the inner forces of spirit and soul to draft and carry through operations of great scope'.[11]

On 28 October Falkenhayn's reinforcements were in position. He scheduled the last serious German breakthrough offensive on the Western Front (until March 1918) for 5:30 on the morning of 29 October. In 1923 the Bavarian official history described his force as consisting of 'war proven older units at whose side stood young, scarcely trained troops, but filled with the spirit of love for the Fatherland'. For tactical reasons the 6th BRD was immediately broken up. The List's sister regiments would fight independently near Wytschaete while the List Regiment joined Saxons, Württemburgers and a militia (*Landsturm*) detachment to form the 54th Reserve Division. In succeeding days this ad hoc force would be pitched into battle at Becalaere and Gheluvelt, suffering losses that caused Adolf Meyer to write: 'Only a few regiments have had to give such a heavy toll in blood in their first fight.' After three days the 'proud List Regiment had melted down to the strength of a battalion'. More than half of its officers were killed, including the 'brave regiment leader, Colonel List, felled by a direct hit in the furthest forward line'.[12]

By October 1914 both the Kaiser and his supreme command knew that the grand strategy of August had failed. The Russians had set their elephantine war machine in motion more quickly than the Germans had foreseen. Although the Russian thrust into East Prussia ended in catastrophe near Tannenberg (where a resurrected General Paul von Hindenburg achieved fame), this incursion presented enough of a threat for two corps to be detached, at a crucial point, from the German armies surging through Belgium. Thus weakened in the west, the Germans failed not only to knock France out, but to deliver the decisive blow on the Eastern Front that would put an end to war on two fronts: although the Germans were winning battles, they were not winning the war. Their strategy, as it existed, was now made up on the run.

Yet all was not without hope. The British force in Flanders was both tiny and vulnerable; a decisive blow against it must diminish British will. Then, if the Channel ports could be taken and an invasion of the British Isles threatened, would not the British either sue for peace or decide that every Briton was needed for defence of the realm? Thus, the focus of the war turned away from Paris towards Calais. With German troops occupying Antwerp, Lille, and cleaning up most of unoccupied Belgium (excepting the salient around Ypres), the threat to Dunkirk and Calais – a day's easy ride for Uhlans from German-occupied territory – was real enough for the *Times* to warn: 'Now that the war is reaching the climax of its violence we must anticipate that all the living forces of Germany will be thrown into the conflict'; for the Germans, with 'a million and a half men under arms in France', it was 'now or never'. Nonetheless, they would be making their 'huge effort with troops which to a large extent are either battle-weary, or do not belong to the first line'; it was now known that German reinforcements must 'consist of new units of men recently trained, "some very young and others fairly old"'.[13]

The List Regiment did 'not belong to the first line'. Yet, its men saw themselves as anything but cannon fodder. Some may have been concerned about their state of training, but the idea that a motley force of Scottish, Irish and Welsh mercenaries augmented by 'coloured' Englishmen from the outposts of empire could be a match for them was intolerable, and had been constantly hammered into their consciousness. Newspapers that had viciously attacked France and its people throughout 1913 and 1914 now called 'Franzmann' a worthy and honourable foe, as devoted to his *patrie* as a German was to his *Vaterland*. Yet even this worthier foe seemed destined to crumble before the German onslaught: the *Norddeutsche Zeitung* already described 'French Withdrawal Plans' prefiguring an inevitable German victory. It was only a matter of days or weeks that the French and English would no longer be able 'to hold the Aisne sector [and] the force exerted by the extended German right wing will become ever stronger'.

> [Since] the fall of Antwerp, finding safe and secure roads of retreat has become much more important to the French commander than any further pursuance of the often dashed hope of breaking through the German

> lines. In addition, it is now clear that the English will not send one more man to help, as the approaching threat to their own land represents sufficient justification for abandoning its Entente partners to their fate.[14]

This was no fantasy-based prediction by a scandalmongering *Käseblatt*, but the opinion of a paper regarded as the mouthpiece of the regime. As if the task confronting the half-fit, under-trained and untried troops of the List Regiment was not daunting enough, it was made even more so because they were encouraged to underestimate it, lulled into over-confidence by the efforts of German propagandists to disparage the English soldier as a mercenary who would quickly capitulate. The coming first battle of Ypres would be a certain German victory.

Even before the battle concluded, the realization that this kind of propaganda might be counterproductive – at least where experienced soldiers were concerned – was bringing changes in the war reportage of German newspapers along with a more realistic kind of war correspondence. Thus, one officer-correspondent still in action near Ypres wrote:

> Eager for the fight and certain of easy victory, the young men of the regiment marched off 'to catch the English', as our soldiers said. Everybody was firmly convinced that God had given the English long legs so that they could run all the faster... We thought of portrayals in our newspapers and humorous magazines of Tommy Atkins... [All] we faced was an army of mercenaries [fighting not] for love of Fatherland or sacrificial courage, but for a few pence a day.[15]

The Germans would be forced to change their opinion. The British quickly 'gave us the answer as to whether they could shoot... already after the first encounter our battalion had half melted-away'. These English soldiers were anything but uncommitted soldiers-of-fortune, for the 'English infantry that opposed us in the vicinity of Ypres must be marked down as among the best of troops.' They defended their 'occupied land against our attacks' with immense energy, and when 'forced back, inevitably, above all at night, attempted to win the lost land back'. These were worthy enemies indeed, for the 'natural hunter-instinct' of the 'sports-practising Englishman' meant that '"Tommy" was faster to shoot [and] quicker to make use of the available ground on patrols etc.'. Fed on high-quality 'conserves, corned beef and bacon', he lived in well-built trenches, 'superbly buttressed with steel reinforcements' which were 'almost invisible to the naked eye'. The Germans had to be on guard now 'not to underestimate English mercenaries. Our advance in West Flanders can only succeed slowly, step by step.'[16]

By the time this was written, Hitler and his comrades had already come to a similar conclusion. Hitler later described how they had been encouraged to form a negative 'conception of the Englishman's character' by the 'the press and comic magazines', until gradually 'everyone was infected by this nonsense, and

the consequence was an underestimation for which we would have to pay most bitterly'. He recalled the 'looks of astonishment' on the faces of comrades when they 'faced the Tommies in person in Flanders. After the very first days of battle the conviction dawned on each and every one of them that these Scotsmen did not exactly jibe with the pictures they had seen fit to give us.' The results 'were devastating; for now the German soldier... felt himself swindled by his propaganda'. Hitler had learnt one of his great lessons from the war. He had already begun reflecting on the 'importance of the form of propaganda'.[17]

If Ypres was the key to the Channel ports, then Gheluvelt was the key to Ypres. In his Order of the Day for 30 October, the corps commander described this village's capture as the chance to 'settle for ever the centuries-long struggle, end the war, and strike the decisive blow against our most-detested enemy. We will finish the British, Indians, Canadians, Moroccans, and other trash, feeble adversaries, who surrender in great numbers if they are attacked with vigour.' By the time the List Regiment received this contemptuous evaluation of its 'most-detested enemy', it had already lost a third of its numbers in battle. Survivors were beginning to realize that the BEF, far from being 'feeble', was an adversary of the highest order.[18]

In full kit, the List Regiment covered the 25 miles from Lille to the German positions near Becalaere on foot. After they crossed the old Belgian frontier, Hitler spent the night of 27 October in a dugout with a decomposing horse. Shells whistled overhead followed by dull thuds in the distance. 'We had never heard anything like it before', he wrote Hepp. 'And while we lay pressed one against the other [the] distant noise drew closer and closer, and the individual thuds came faster and faster until finally they merged into one continuous roar.' Another day's marching was followed by a night in a 'wretched farmhouse'. On the morning of 29 October the troops moved into the forward trenches. 'At last came the order to advance. We fanned out and raced across a field towards a small farm. To either side of us, shells kept bursting and English bullets kept whistling by. But we paid no heed.'

> On we went again. I leapt and ran as best I could across meadows and turnip fields, jumped across ditches, negotiated wire-entanglements and hedges. And then I heard a shout right in front: 'All of you, in here!' A long trench stretched out before; a moment later I had jumped in and countless men all round me were doing likewise. By my side were Wurtemburgers, beneath me dead and wounded Englishmen. The Wurtemburgers had taken the trench by storm.[19]

German artillery, which had hardly fired a shell so far, suddenly burst into life. 'Again and again, one of our shells landed in the English trench. They poured out like ants from an ant heap.' After many 'bloody hand-to-hand skirmishes we cleared the lot of them out of their trenches. Many came out with their hands up. Those who did not were mowed down.'[20]

Hitler's description of that first morning accords with other sources. Mend, who had become Colonel List's personal messenger, described the dawn of the battle as a 'last awakening [for] many of my comrades'. All around, the skies 'were flaming red from the burning villages'. When the command to march was given, Mend 'rode at the head of the regiment in order to find Colonel List', and once more noticed Adolf Hitler, 'marching a little to the Front, bent and with a smile on his lips'. He wondered how 'this slightly built man would manage if he had to carry a full field pack', but would subsequently learn 'there were few in the regiment as healthy or so full of stamina as Hitler. With unbelievable toughness he endured the greatest strains and never showed any weakness.' Not only was he tough but he would prove himself brave.

> [The] battle-ordinance, to which Hitler also belonged, was far more exposed to enemy fire than the companies themselves, for while the latter could always find cover in the terrain, the ordinance staff were constantly on the move with messages and I am amazed even today, how Adolf Hitler came through [the war] so fortunately.[21]

Although Mend added little to descriptions of that first morning's experience, his explanation for many of the losses accords with that of Hitler and Rubenhauer.

> We reached Becalaere, were immediately in action and already this first day endured enormous losses. Since the troops of the List Regiment had received as headgear with their equipment militia caps [*Landsturmmützen*], the Württemburgers, in the belief that they were English, had fired violently on them, through this error many had to lose their lives.[22]

The Germans had helped bring misfortune upon themselves. Propaganda had lulled them into a sense of complacency, even contempt, about the enemy facing them. Told by newspapers and officers to expect a pushover, the attacking troops greeted the first appearance of the foe on 29 October with hilarity. The regimental history describes all order being 'lost in the forward rush. Everybody wanted to lead, to be on hand to harvest seemingly easy-to-win laurels.' And then the Bavarians sighted the 'tall bare-legged highlanders, their blue-green-red striped knee-length skirts flattened wide in the wind, and as the kilted soldiers sprang out from the furrowed field, a fresh round of merriment broke loose. "There, that shows it Captain, they've got women with 'em!" one cried – "Calm down, they're Scotsmen!..." Everybody laughed.'[23]

The *élan* of this initial Bavarian rush brought some success. Due to inexperience, however, 'not once' were the 'English positions in the forward drive thoroughly searched'. Unscathed and unobserved, the Tommies were free to fire on the Bavarians from behind. With British riflemen firing at them from fore and aft, Württemburgers confusing them with the enemy and British artillery fire plunging pell-mell into their mass, their 'fighting strength was melting

away with frightful speed'. Towards midday, 'the last reserve units had to be committed'.

> The wounded lay everywhere behind the thickets... Confronted by the formidable firepower of the opponents [a] successful breakthrough could no longer be reckoned upon... It was not possible for orders to get through, many of the junior commanders had already fallen, the first-aid equipment was completely mixed-up and the use of dispatch runners unthinkable.[24]

By now Hitler and Schmidt must have been among those (temporarily unemployable) dispatch runners. Hitler had already delivered his first messages. According to Mend, Hitler, having 'lined up fearlessly for the most difficult messages', was already beginning to earn the reputation of being 'one of the best and most reliable battle-ordinance men'. 'That's for sure', Mend quotes an ordinance staffer as saying, 'but I still can't understand how he can put his life at such risk, when he owns not a single German stone; he is certainly a strange one and lives in his own world; otherwise he's a capable fellow'. At that moment Hitler marched past, his 'headgear crooked on his head, his face quite yellow, but in his eyes as always a lively expression'.[25]

At 4 p.m. the attack recommenced, and 'a few hundred metres of land was won in short leaps'. Through 'brilliant observation and communication work' the British now brought to bear 'such violent and sharply well-directed shrapnel fire', that the shot, pelting 'down in a thick hail over the forward assault detachments caused them to fall like ripe sheaves under the scythe of the harvester'. The divisional commander finally recognized that 'because of strong enemy opposition and the approaching darkness, no more attacking aims could be achieved that day without exceptionally great sacrifice'. Under the cover of approaching darkness the 'remnants of the companies [were] drawn out of the battle and assembled near the regimental command post so that they might be reused in the course of the night'. This sector of the Front had been 'advanced almost 1 kilometre, 400 prisoners and 5 machine guns were brought in'.

> The night that fell over the battlefield covered 349 dead comrades. The regimental commander Colonel List advised the battalions on the tactical success of the day: 'Enemy thrown out of all his positions, several hundred prisoners. Infantry holds the positions won and is digging in there. Reinforcements from the 6. Res. Inf.-Division are expected soon.'[26]

Another 'tactical success' of this kind and the regiment would disappear. With a loss of 349 dead plus more than double that number wounded on the first day, the List Regiment faced its second day of battle with less than two-thirds combat strength. Doubtless the experience was, as Meyer claimed, 'unforgettable' for

those who 'survived the first assault across the wide turnip field before Becalaere'. Still the events of 29 October were 'only the start of a great battle for us [since] Gheluvelt still had to be taken'.[27]

From a casualty standpoint, 30 October was not as bad as the 29th, but it still 'brought severe losses in [our] position south-east of the village'. The regiment was being decimated, if not quite to the extent claimed by Hitler in a letter to Munich: 'On the very first day, we lost nearly all our officers and our company was only left with vice-sergeant-majors. On the fourth day our regiment had been reduced from 3,600 to 611 men.' List was no longer alive by the fourth day. As early as the second he had been 'greatly upset at this loss of officers'. In the official account he is described as 'pale and crestfallen', pleading 'How shall I alone take responsibility as commander for the lives of all the young men, of whom so many of their own comrades have been shot, if it goes on I shall soon be quite alone.' Compounding his problems was the inadequacy of artillery support. He called a staff meeting to discuss the situation: 'Gentlemen, we have before us a difficult task!' he began. 'Just before the break of day the assault on Gheluvelt must be made. Tomorrow the area must be in our hands! What do you think of that?'

> 'If it must be done will it be done', replied [a] battalion commander. 'But I must be permitted to advise that our strength is exceptionally weak, scarcely a third of the battalion's. We have no more support behind the Front. The men are exhausted. I am convinced, that in a pure infantry attack on the strong English position scarcely one man will come out alive.'[28]

List concurred. He had 'emphatically stated the same view' at divisional HQ, 'but was unable to convince them'. While agreeing to try 'once more to achieve a postponement until the artillery has made more effective preparation', he doubted 'this will be successful'. At divisional HQ, he argued 'that a pure infantry attack against such a cunning, intelligent and strongly fortified opponent must lead, if not to failure, then to an extreme blood sacrifice'. His request that heavy artillery be used 'during the night to prepare the positions thoroughly before we send the infantry out' was ignored. Again, List met the remaining officers. 'You have heard, gentlemen, what our task is tomorrow! The business must be done – orders are orders! God grant that it succeeds!' It was now that he learnt that the artillery was to play an even lesser role. In the belief that the enemy would 'not be driven out of his position by artillery', the infantry alone must 'lead the attack until single artillery columns can be drawn forward into the defensive lines'. Artillery could play little part in an attack that was meant to 'bring about the principal decision of the campaign'.[29]

Gheluvelt would share the honour, with the Fromelles battles of May 1915 and July 1916, of being one of the regiment's most celebrated engagements. Although portrayed as a glorious victory it was at best a temporary success. The

official regimental history describes, in a breathless, present-tense rush, how, towards eight o'clock on the morning of 31 October, troops 'from three regiments move out resolutely, their souls filled with the firm and absolute desire that today they will win the decisive success'. A 'furious' artillery barrage immediately confronted them.

> The losses grow under the violent fire that the enemy hurls towards the attackers from cannons and machine-guns. They lean and fall down on their knees among the hedges, mown down by burst of fire – but the yawning gaps are always filled again by fresh fighters. Our artillery's lack of ammunition is clearly noticeable; it can offer the attack no effective support.
>
> Morning passes in tough, bloody stand-up fights. A horrifying battle-music, a true concert from Hell fills the battlefield. The howls, hisses, crashes of the heavy shells of English naval cannons constantly bursting between the lines, the rolls of machine-gun salvos and the clatter of infantry weapons – the fire rises from violent storm to raging assault, to eerie hurricane. Whole rows drop while pushing forward – crash back again, break in on themselves – is it not mad to advance in this fire? – and new waves push in – repeated hour after hour. The excitement is unproductive; all reserves are already used up. At last at 3 o'clock in the afternoon the enemy's key-point, the windmill on the south-slope of the area from where so much [havoc] has been created, is brought under heavy fire by our artillery, caught cleanly and shattered with a few direct hits.[30]

The destruction of the windmill represented 'the turning-point'. Now 'the way is free! Blow after blow of heavy calibre falls. With this the signal for a general assault is given. On to the trenches! Out with the enemy! In thick waves the Württemburgers and Saxons break through the hedges with our IIIrd Battalion, storming the windmill in an assault right up to the edge of the battlefield.'

> For a moment enemy fire falls silent – it is like a deep, eerie breathing space – then it breaks with strengthened force – a single fire-spitting maw – but on must go on – forwards! Then at the critical moment, the assault signal of the buglers is heard over the whole fighting front! Knapsacks are discarded – everyone pulls himself up – Bavarians, Saxons, Swabians all closed together – there are no more stops – only forwards! – A thousand-voiced Hurrah roars across the battlefield, a single violent victory cry – and like a wild surf the storm waves throw themselves at the village! – Gheluvelt is ours![31]

But not for long. In the words of Sir James Edmonds, the 'Germans actually broke through at Gheluvelt, but at this very critical moment of the war, when all

seemed lost, were driven out by local counter-attacks'. The British counter-offensive took the raw Bavarian troops and their few remaining officers completely by surprise. When a British regular company (of Worcesters) entered the village, now in German hands, they found Bavarians 'enjoying the repose of victory, searching for water and looting, and in no expectation of such an onslaught. They offered no organized resistance, and were soon fleeing back in confusion through the village.' Given this display of complacency and ill discipline, it is scarcely surprising that the List Regiment's official history should gloss over the British recapture of Gheluvelt. By this time, however, the regiment was virtually leaderless; List himself having become a fatal casualty.[32]

Throughout the German attack, List had been 'in the middle of thick fire in the advanced assault line'. When his officers remonstrated with him not to put himself in danger, he replied, 'Don't worry about me! As long as I have such officers, I won't be missed!' List lost his life, not leading his troops in a charge, but while setting up headquarters in Gheluvelt chateau. On his way to see the colonel, Mend saw 'three heavy English shells [smash] into the building. I could see nothing any more, and could no longer breathe for dust.' From the chateau Mend heard cries for help. A shot had ploughed into a group of Saxons and a 'few telegraph operators sprang immediately to the aid of the wounded. At once one cried out: "The Bavarian colonel is also dead!" In my horror I left my horse unattended and sprang to the side of Colonel List, now covered by a tent flap. I lifted this away and saw that blood welled from his mouth. [Our] brave commander, who was a true leader of his troops, was no more.'[33]

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler romanticized his first experience of battle, describing the 'iron greeting that came whizzing at us from over our heads' and glossing over the death, mayhem and destruction. He 'remembered', however, the 'hurrah' 'from two hundred throats', which rose to meet this 'first dispatch runner of death'.

> Then a crackling and a roaring, a singing and a howling began, and with feverish eyes each one of us was drawn forward, faster and faster, until suddenly past turnip fields and hedges the fight began, the fight of man against man. And from the distance the strains of a song reached our ears, coming closer and closer, and just as Death plunged a busy hand into our ranks, the song reached us too and we passed it along: '*Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles, über Alles in der Welt*!'[34]

The official regimental history dismisses Hitler's battlefield recollection as 'an historical error'. In fact they had sung 'The Watch on the Rhine', not storming into battle but during the 'most difficult fighting, as regulations prescribed, as a means of giving recognition to fellow Germans'! With Gheluvelt Hitler's brief career as a front-line infantryman was already over. Schmidt told how, during the first day's fighting, they were sheltering behind a hedge when approached by an officer who told them to take a verbal report to the regimental staff. In

successfully completing this assignment, they showed that the regiment had found two dispatch runners; men reliable and intelligent enough to bring a message from the Front and transmit it verbally and mistake-free.[35]

Nine years after the battle, the Bavarian official history summed up the List Regiment's participation in the Gheluvelt battle as being in 'unfavourable circumstances and with heavy losses'. The official German communiqué of 30 October merely reported, 'Our attacks to the south of Nieuport and to the East of Ypres were completed successfully. Eight machine-guns were captured along with eight-hundred Englishmen.' On 31 October, comment was even briefer. 'The attack on Ypres continues.'[36]

Hitler later wrote that after the List Regiment's fourth day of fighting, 'Even our step had changed. Seventeen-year-old boys now looked like men.' After four days, the List Regiment had lost more than two-thirds of its combat troops, killed, wounded and taken prisoner, and almost all its senior officers, who, for the most part, had been killed. In just four days, Hitler had been transferred from an infantry company to become a regimental dispatch runner, promoted to corporal and nominated for an Iron Cross. He was one of the fortunate ones, and already on his way to earning the nickname 'Lucky Linzer'. So heavy had the fighting been that the regiment's Third Battalion 'had to be disbanded on 3 November. Survivors were shared among the remaining two, drastically thinned-out battalions. Only at Christmas 1914 was it possible, with the arrival of new 9th and 10th companies, to reconstitute the battalion.' With remarkable frankness in a regimental history of its kind, Rubenhauer dared question the point of those losses.

> Our troops had fought brilliantly; the losses however, were enormous, in particular among the Württemburg Regiment 247, which had lost most of its officers and all its assault leaders.
>
> Can the violent nature of this attack, before the extremely strong position of the opponents was reduced, shaken, made ready for attack by a lengthier artillery preparation, be excused? Did the tactical victory justify the huge sacrifices?...[37]

A tactical Phyrric victory he could have added. Yet in its defence, the regiment that had first helped capture Gheluvelt before fleeing the village was barely of battalion strength. Still, this group of almost leaderless survivors could not be spared, and was sent into action briefly at Messines (where Hitler was first nominated, unsuccessfully, for an Iron Cross) and then at Bethlehem Farm, near Wytschaete. The losses incurred here were such that the List Regiment could no longer be treated as a fully functional unit. Even so, it was still not relieved, being sent instead to a supposedly quiet sector of the line for a week. Meanwhile, a 'permanent' replacement had been found for Colonel List, one Lieutenant Colonel Engelhardt also of the reserve. Otherwise, the few remaining subalterns were promoted a rank or two and senior NCOs left to carry on as temporary officers. Some Infanterists were, like Hitler, promoted after a battle experience best

counted in hours. The state of List Regiment reflected that of the 6th BRD – which it had by now rejoined – as a whole. While the Listers had bled and marched across the west Flanders landscape, their Bavarian brothers had been bogged down near Wytschaete in a savage attritional fight against both French and British troops. The division was, by now, reduced almost to the strength of a regiment and those young reservists still capable of bearing arms not only looked older but different. 'We didn't wear our militia caps, with which we'd gone in battle, any more', one *Infanterist* wrote. 'There were enough *Pickelhauben* lying around on the battlefield of Ypres.' These moulded leather and steel-strapped helmets were probably more ceremonial than protective (it would be 18 months before the all-steel *Stahlhelm* was available), but at least those wearing *Pickelhauben* were recognizable as *German* troops.[38]

The remnants of the regiment were finally pulled out of the line on 1 November and a 'shattering reunion' took place at Werwick on 2 November – 'an anxious question about this or that comrade, a silent inner welling of tears at the answer "Fallen". Yet, everyone carried in his breast a proud feeling, the consciousness of having shared in the laurels of the regiment's first success[!]' Roll call on 4 November revealed a regimental strength of 'no more than 725 non-commissioned officers and men'. During its five days of action, more than two-thirds of its battle strength had been lost for gains measurable in yards. This is the distressing result described as 'a success' by Rubenhauer. In the two weeks between Gheluvelt and Bayernwald, the regiment spent 'six days of rest' in the reserve trenches behind the Lys Canal on the western outskirts of Comines, which they entered, despite their condition, with a 'rousing march [their] parade-step sounding firm, their eyes shining brightly, the troops had inwardly won their test against the powerful shocks and impressions of the past fighting days'. There was no real 'rest', for the infantrymen who had to repair damaged trenches and, where possible, improve their position while constantly exposed to the fire of British field guns. Shells regularly found their mark, wrecking the restored breastworks and taking lives. Hitler was already displaying a true believer's naiveté towards the aims and conduct of the war that irritated many a comrade; 'never complaining about the length, the hardships and the general nonsense of the war... never grumbling or getting bored'. Mend tells of an argument with a soldier who complained of the 'great danger to which they were constantly exposed', to which Hitler snapped: 'If all the other orderlies were as cowardly as you, the colonel could deliver his own dispatches. I believe you have a battle psychosis.' Even so, the dispatch runners had few dispatches to deliver and no labouring duties to perform, so Hitler was able to catch up on his newspapers and begin writing the first of that handful of letters and postcards he sent to acquaintances in Munich.[39]

On 8 November, the regiment took over a line of trenches before Messines. They were pulled out as night fell, and as they marched to their new position, the men found their way blocked by mysterious moving shapes, lit spasmodically by flares or flickering battlefield lights. They took cover and opened fire, which was

maintained on and off until dawn. First light revealed not piles of dead Frenchmen, but a bloodied mess that had once been a herd of cows. The regiment reached its destination – a position facing the so-called *Bayernwald* (Bavarian wood) near Wytschaete – without further incident and faced French *poilus* for the first time. The French were 'very alert and nervous', and the Bavarians had to be constantly on guard against raids and the 'occasional' artillery barrage. At midday on 11 November, the French unleashed 'an hour long barrage which completely destroyed [a] company sector and caused considerable losses in dead and wounded'. Next morning, the three-day fighting career of Engelhardt ('an elastic, single-minded colonial officer') as regimental commander began.[40]

The village of Wytschaete, the occupation of which, along with Gheluvelt, was considered crucial to whole German campaign against Ypres, had actually fallen to the remaining regiments of the 6th BRD while the Listers were fighting near Gheluvelt. As with the List Regiment at Gheluvelt, its sister regiments had suffered the indignity of being evicted from a village they had just captured. British successes in counter-attacks at Gheluvelt and Wytschaete were doubtless the events which, on 31 October, caused the *Times*' Special Correspondent to gloat (along with a claim that Lille had been retaken) how 'The German Emperor has had his wish. His Bavarians have met the English "just once".'

> They have met in the centre of the battle line in Flanders. They have recoiled before us. In the small corner of France north of Lille they have been forced back by foot onto the Belgian frontier...
>
> The fighting has been furious and desperate for many days. Our Little Army has been vastly outnumbered. But they have no fear of the Bavarian infantry. Everywhere I hear the same story. The German foot soldier cannot shoot, he will not stop to fight. When attacked he runs away: he fires over his shoulder as he runs, or throws down his arms and surrenders.[41]

Yet in these days the *Times* was still concerned enough to write not of the battle for Ypres but of 'The Fight for Calais', while pointing out how 'The German Attack on England' had forced to undergo 'A Temporary Postponement'.[42]

The only fighting near Wytschaete, in which the List Regiment was implicated in 1914, took place just two weeks after the earlier action involving its sister regiments. Since, by this time, Falkenhayn had already decided to call off the offensive, it was merely another murderous action in which many men on both sides were killed for no particular reason. Nonetheless, this pointless fight over a minor patch of wood was the List Regiment's first action against French soldiers in the war; in an action, moreover, which won for Adolf Hitler the Iron Cross Second Class.

Despite the millions of words written about him, Adolf Hitler can be one of the most difficult characters in history when it comes to determining truth, particularly in respect of his life before the foundation of NSDAP. It is impossible to

avoid the conclusion that this is what Hitler would have wanted. Plagued with fears about his own uncertain but closely bred (and possibly Jewish) ancestry, he was concerned to the point of paranoia to hide any other unpalatable truths from the German people, decreeing that they must 'not be allowed to know who I am, from where and from which family I come'. He showed in *Mein Kampf* – and in a lifelong habit of exaggerating intellectual attainments – a willingness to fictionalize achievement and experience. It is not surprising therefore, given also an absence of first-hand reliable verification, that even after 80 years, events as significant as the awarding of his Iron Crosses in the Great War are subject to contradictory accounts. In 1987, Lyn Macdonald, a usually dependable and often forensic popular historian, helped muddy the waters in recounting the story of 'a young corporal in the German Army', who, during the first battle of Ypres, was 'caught up in fierce fighting with the French close to Wytschaete village'. Seeing his commanding officer wounded and lying under fire in the open, this corporal dashed through heavy fire across open country to rescue and carry the officer to safety. For 'Captain Hoffmann' it was too late.

> [The] young German was awarded the Iron Cross in recognition of his bravery. Captain Hoffman died of his wounds, and in later life the corporal who had rescued him made no secret of the fact that he looked on his own miraculous preservation as a sign that great things were in store for him. A single bullet might have changed the course of history. His name was Adolf Hitler.[43]

By November 1914, Hitler was already a corporal and by then he did consider himself destined for greater things. On 15–17 November 1914, he was involved in a Bavarian attack near Wytschaete where he won the Iron Cross Second Class. Otherwise, Macdonald's account bears only a casual resemblance to what happened that day. She confuses the issue further by stating, 'Some days later, when he was relieved from the line, Corporal Adolf Hitler had the honour of receiving the Iron Cross from the hands of Kaiser Wilhelm himself.' Indeed, the Kaiser did pay a visit to the List Regiment in the trenches. In a 1915 account of the fighting at Becalaere and Gheluvelt, the *Infanterist* Fritz Burgdörfer remembered the Kaiser arriving on the battlefield on 'the last evening of the third day of battle' (i.e., 30 or 31 October), where he made 'reference to the Bavarians and in particular our 16th Reserve Infantry Regiment. A balsam for our wounds!' Burgdörfer was clearly referring to events at Becalaere and Gheluvelt in his description of the 'Fighting against the English', and not the later fighting against the French near Wytschaete, where Hitler did win the Iron Cross Second Class. Another *Infanterist* elaborated on the Kaiser's very brief visit thus:

> On a clear, mild early November morning, the Kaiser suddenly appeared at the Front. On time and quite early; it was certainly before 8 o'clock. And quite close to the furthest trenches. A few hundred paces away,

> English gunners threatened. What did the Kaiser do? He laughed, because the Englishmen had shot up the lions on our battalion's flag and he congratulated our leaders on the courage of the regiment. Then he dashed off in the waiting car.[44]

Quite simply, the Kaiser appeared before the fighting at Wytschaete and spent too little time with the regiment to pin an EK2 on Hitler's, or anybody else's, chest. Furthermore, while a non-commissioned soldier had to demonstrate a worthwhile act of valour to win this award, it was fairly common in the German forces of 1914–18. It is also inconceivable that Wilhelm II would have so pointlessly broken imperial protocol and have had so much free time on his hands to be able to tour the battlefield handing out EK2s to Bavarian corporals. Macdonald's dramatic and colourful tale attracts through its portrayal of a loyal soldier's dash across bullet-swept country to bring back a mortally wounded, beloved officer, and is artfully resolved in the way the supreme warlord of one war acknowledges the existence and bravery of his successor in the next. Although the names Hofmann, Hoffmann or Hoffman are common in Germany, there was no such captain in the List Regiment in November 1914. Where Macdonald found her version of events remains a mystery.[45]

As far back as 1944, the details of Hitler's EK2 were on record. In a letter from the Front in 1914, cited by Konrad Heiden, Hitler stated that he had been twice proposed for the award, for the second time and successfully 'in Wytschaete by Lieutenant-Colonel Engelhardt, our regimental commander'. He claims to have 'worshipped' Engelhardt, the same officer Hitler sought to protect on the day in question. Engelhardt's own subsequent account states:

> As our men were storming the wedge-shaped wood [I] stepped out of the woods near Wytschaete to get a better view of developments. Hitler and the volunteer Bachmann, another battle orderly from the 16th Regiment, stood before me to protect me with their bodies from the machine-gun fire to which I was exposed.[46]

Engelhardt's memory was playing him false. His troops had not been storming the wood, but were bogged down under heavy fire in the ravine that faced it. Anxious to discover why the attack had stalled, he moved from cover in order to seek a 'better view'. Engelhardt's version of events is qualified by a similar (albeit unflattering) account by a former regimental adjutant, Georg Eichelsdörfer, also written in 1932.

> The regimental commander wanted to intervene personally and set out from the ravine for the edge of the woods [but] he had hardly been discovered by the keen eye of the enemy, when murderous infantry and machine-gun fire was directed at him. He would have paid with his life for his foolhardiness [had not] the regimental orderlies accompanying him, Adolf Hitler and Bachmann sprung forward [and] protected him

> with their bodies, pushing him back to safety with the words that the regiment could not afford to lose its second commander in so short a time... Unfortunately, the fears of the two orderlies were fulfilled all too quickly.[47]

The next day Engelhardt was hit again, so seriously as to put an end to his war. Bachmann and Hitler were the first regimental orderlies to be awarded an EK2. By then, 23 other men in the regiment had been likewise decorated. None met the Kaiser.[48]

On the evening of 14 November, in the lead-up to the above event, the List Regiment was ordered to be ready to attack a French-held wood near Wytschaete at seven the next morning. After midnight on a cool, rainy night, the regiment moved out. Still half asleep, the men stumbled and trudged through a dark lunar landscape pock-marked with 'countless water-filled shell-holes'. In the half light the ruins of Wytschaete 'stood out ghost-like on the horizon', cast momentarily into relief by the occasional flare fired 'from fighting deep in the salient between Wytschaete and Messines'. With the approach of dawn the rain that 'long since had already and completely soaked through [their] clothes continued to fall'.

> The assault began at 7 o'clock precisely; but the first troops had scarcely left their protective cover when the enemy threw down a murderous rifle and machine-gun rain of fire on the unprotected assault troops. Worst of all was an enemy battery on the left flank, which caused such heavy losses as to render any further progress unthinkable.
>
> Hour after hour passed, without it being possible to make even the slightest forward movement.[49]

The ravine by the edge of the wood where the men found shelter was a trap, from which some men, finally, were able to break out. Exposed in open ground, 'our brave troops suffered such heavy losses that it was only possible for a tiny fraction of them to forge ahead into the wood'. Some Frenchmen fled, but others stood their ground, engaging the Bavarians in vicious hand-to-hand combat in a wood thickly threaded with 'looped and barbed wire'. This created such 'great difficulties that the weakened [Bavarian force] was unable to push through to the far edge of the wood'. On seeing this, 'countless French troops who had hitherto fled found new courage and returned to the wood'. Engelhardt was in command when 'by a supreme effort at the limit of its strength', the regiment 'succeeded in throwing the enemy out of an important strongpoint'.

> Thus our young Regiment stitched a new victory to its flag, which is all the more to be treasured as it was facing an angry opponent who fought treacherously. After two days stuck in shell holes filled with water and mud, the men were covered from head to toe with slime, their weapons filled with dirt.

> Many brave men in this fight displayed admirable examples of personal bravery [but] once more, the regiment suffered heavy losses . . . Sadly many of our comrades were also taken prisoner.[50]

The Bavarians had seized a section of tiny woodland at a cost so extreme that by 17 November (described as a 'fateful day' in the regimental history) the numbers of men and officers fit for duty had reached the point where it was necessary to merge some companies, which were left 'for the most part without leaders'. Early that morning, the enemy unleashed 'strong fire against our first line, the ravine and the wooded country behind it'. It was now that the unfortunate Engelhardt was 'badly wounded' for the second time.

> [His] left hand was mutilated and a shell-splinter had severed the main artery of his right thigh. Since these serious wounds were not immediately noticed in the excitement and because of the prevailing darkness, the resulting rapid and heavy loss of blood caused his gradual loss of consciousness and with the words: 'I wanted to serve my Fatherland', he sank backwards.[51]

Hitler recorded that the grenade, which wounded Engelhardt, simultaneously killed four company commanders. Wytschaete had been a perilous experience for Hitler and his fellow messengers: 'on the day of the first attack, three of us eight were shot and one badly wounded'.

> We four survivors and the wounded man were cited for distinction. And this saved our lives. For while the list of those proposed for the 'Cross' was being discussed, four company commanders came into the tent, or dugout. Due to lack of space, the four of us had to step out. We had not been outside for five minutes when a grenade struck the tent, gravely wounding Lieutenant-Colonel Engelhardt and killing or wounding all the rest of the staff. It was the most terrible moment of my life. We worshipped Lieutenant-Colonel Engelhardt.[52]

For Engelhardt, the war was over. 'In the space of a few weeks the regiment had lost its second commander; this incident weighed heavily on the mood of the officers and men and put a damper on the joy of their successful achievement.' What successful achievement? The 'conquest' of a tiny area of wood at the cost of further casualties in a decimated regiment? This regimental 'success' might read as a metaphor for the whole German breakthrough campaign at Ypres.[53]

Thus, Adolf Hitler, later eulogized as a 'Hero of Langemarck', took only a peripheral part in the events of 9–11 November 1914 which created the 'Langemarck Legend'. The legend's source seems to have been an order of the day from Crown Prince Rupprecht, which appeared in the *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* on 10 November.

> Soldiers! The eyes of the whole world are upon you!
> We cannot let up in the fight against our hated enemy, in order finally to break his arrogance. Already countless [enemy] officers and men have voluntarily surrendered. But the greatest, decisive battle awaits us. – You must therefore hold out unto the last man. You will persevere, – so as not to let them out of your teeth.
>
> We must be victorious, we want to be victorious and we will be victorious. Rupprecht, Kronprinz von Bayern.[54]

The first appearance of Rupprecht's order in Bavaria's most popular newspaper (followed up Reich-wide the following day) suggests that the target audience was the home front, as the following day's official communiqué tends to confirm. 'Supreme Headquarters, 11 November 1914. To the West of Langemarck the young regiments sang "Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles" as they advanced and took the first line of enemy trenches.' The regiments in question were of the 44th (Prussian) Reserve Division, a unit constituted similarly to the 6th BRD. In reality, the Prussian achievement was unspectacular. While the right wing of the division initially enjoyed some success and a few prisoners were taken, the left wing hung 'a good way back'. While these young *Kriegsfreiwillige* had, as the communiqué suggested, 'broken into the enemy's first position... its eastern wing was completely held up in front of LANGEMARCK' by an enemy 'defending every yard of ground with the utmost determination'. This offensive of 10–11 November was a final assault, undertaken without any great hope, by which the Germans might redeem their failure to defeat France in accordance with the Schlieffen timetable.

> On the 11th November the combined of the Fourth Army and the Army Groups Linsingen and Fabeck took place. The remainder of the Fourth and Sixth Armies continued their attacks. The great efforts made by the Fourth Army on the 10th had considerably weakened it, and further handicapped by a heavy rainstorm which beat in the faces of the attacking troops, no special success was gained by it on the 11th.[55]

There was, of course, the 'moral' victory 'won' from the fact that 'the enemy was everywhere held to his ground and prevented from transferring any troops to other parts of the Front [!]'. On the day Hitler won his EK2, the *Norddeutsche Zeitung* devoted a panegyric to the volunteers who fought and died near Langemarck. On the basis of a communiqué of 23 words, the *Norddeutsche*'s leader writer conjured up a lengthy patriotic essay. 'The spirit of the nation' (Der Geist der Nation) made no mention of the 'greatest, decisive battle'. Instead, the German people were told that the events described in the communiqué of 11 November 'created an unequivocal glory page for Germany's youth'.

> A people whose boys, fresh from the school desk, can become heroes of the kind described in that military communiqué is healthy and will always by its nature remain healthy!...German *Kriegsfreiwillige* described in an enemy newspaper as having fought 'with superhuman courage', must already be healthy. The heroism of the young blood of a nation cannot be created in an instant.[56]

'Enemy opinion' was a quote from the London *Times* of 8 November. This did describe a 'superhuman final effort', not by *Kriegsfreiwillige* but by a division of German *regular* troops. So well had these troops fought that the British were only able to turn them back by 'the most terrible bayonet charge of the whole war'. Taking a lead from the government's mouthpiece, the mainstream German press devoted a frenzied publicity campaign to German youth, Langemarck and 11 November. Instead of victory, the German Right would have its Langemarck Day, and after the war this offered extreme right-wing politicians like Hitler a patriotic alternative to that 'infamous' day when Germany's 'November criminals' ended the fighting in the Great War.[57]

While the official Reichsarchiv monograph admits that they 'had not succeeded in making the decisive break-through, and [that] the dream of ending the campaign in the West in our favour during 1914 had to be consigned to its grave', there was still an insistence that the 'first battle of Ypres was a German victory'. In Flanders 'up to the 14 November 1914, 40 divisions had been put into the battle round YPRES by the Western Allies, while only 25 divisions were opposed to them'. At Ypres, the British 'were made to realize that the German heroism was not to be vanquished'. Who could possibly doubt, it was argued, 'that a nation, whose sons know how to fight like this, must win? Let us only hold the hope that the deeds of blood sown in Flanders will bring forth rich and splendid fruit for the German Fatherland.' Writing 18 years later, Rubenhauer took a similar line. The high command had been obliged to call off the Ypres offensive not from lack of success or losses of men and *matériel*, but because of the weather!

> Winter caused the German bayonets to be sheathed, the grey damp misery of Flanders yawned over the assault trenches, shrouded the German Army in rain showers and clouds of fog, called the water ways of the Flemish soil to battle so that the French and English had the good luck and success to repulse, check and parry the iron thrust of the forward-storming German Army. The front solidified.[58]

The fighting for *Bayernwald* was the List Regiment's last major engagement for 1914 and one of the last German offensives of First Ypres. Two days later Falkenhayn called off the battle and this drew to an unsatisfactory (for the Germans) conclusion. Between Becalaere and the commencement of the fighting at Bayernwald, the regiment had been heavily engaged for 18 days. After Gheluvelt, the only men available to replace losses were those returning from wounds.

On 1 November alone, at Bethlehem Farm, the regiment lost 119 men *killed*, a ravine near Wytschaete being 'filled with dead and wounded'. Carrying messages, across a landscape exposed to artillery fire, snipers and machine-gunners, dispatch runners were placed in a 'most dangerous' situation and many were lost. Hitler remained unscathed. 'How he succeeded in getting through', Mend wrote, 'in spite of the incessant artillery fire, is to this day incomprehensible to me.' He later expressed amazement at Hitler 'still being alive and recalled, laughing: "Man, there's no bullet with your number on it!" A grin was [Hitler's] only answer.'[59]

One of the more realistic German assessments of the battle appeared in the Bavarian official history, which sought to put the achievement of, or lack thereof, of the volunteer reserve divisions in an unsentimental and critical light. 'The hope, with which the young volunteers of the Fourth Army had been drawn to Flanders – to bring decisive victory [in] the West – had not been fulfilled; in vain, the best of the nation disappeared in the bloody quarrel near Ypres.'

> A bitter revenge was wrought for the false saving made in peacetime, allowing millions of German men to remain free from military obligation. All fighting courage, all enthusiasm and self sacrifice could not compensate for lack of training and experience . . .
>
> In spite of this, great things were achieved: The mooring on the [Belgian] coast had been won and the German right flank protected from encirclement. The memory of the self-sacrifice and love of Fatherland shown by the volunteers of 1914 will live for eternity, and remain to later generations a costly bequest.[60]

Three and a half years of unremitting trench warfare, called *Stellungskrieg* by the Germans, had begun. Told by their commanders and newspapers that they had won a great victory, the men of the List Regiment embarked for the quarters where they would spend their first winter of the war.

5

WINTER 1914–15

After the fighting near Wytschaete, the division endured a further 'four days and four nights [of] strong enemy fire'. At last, on 20 November, the 'over-used and exhausted List Regiment was allowed to march off into divisional reserve'. The men left the trenches buoyed by the prospect of a rest and by the rumour that they were to be transferred to the Eastern Front.

> In those days, although the regiment had no way of knowing, this wish was almost fulfilled. On 19 November advice was sent to Crown Prince Rupprecht from the high command that six divisions, among them our 6th BRD, were to be placed under the command of Hindenburg, who had already won a decision in the East. But the List Regiment's luck would not be sweet. This did not happen.[1]

With Engelhardt wounded, Lieutenant-Colonel Petz, seconded from the 17th RIR, assumed temporary command in time to receive a draft of 400 reinforcements; a significant step towards restoring battle readiness. Serious offensives were nevertheless unthinkable in the Flanders mud and rain, the more so since the opponents had already fought each other to a standstill. Both sides were now digging in for a new phase of the war.

> Without rest, the difficult activity of fortification work begins. New trenches [are] built, and connected by communication trenches... [The] front is being built with toughness and speed [with] the sweat and blood of the best. This collaborative work is for Life; Death is the employer. The sooner it is complete, the less time for the enemy to fire, the deeper the trenches, the more secure the shelter, the safer the cover against shrapnel, the better to withstand shells.[2]

Although spared the grind of the infantryman, Hitler and the dispatch runners were still responsible for delivering daily reports and frequent messages. Regimental headquarters, in the ruins of the Grand Place at Messines, received regular

artillery attention. The 'nervousness' of British troops and their persistent raiding turned the crater-pitted land and trenches around Messines into a danger zone. A dispatch runner, if he survived a cross-country dash and arrived safely at his destination, could find himself trapped in the open in the middle of a British raid. 'Days and weeks passed, for all of us in a state of the greatest stress, which cost many good comrades their lives.'

> Even if filthy, sulphur-yellow like a canary, with bullet holes in the great coat or dispatch case, the lucky ones among us were glad to be able to march safely back into our quarters. With steaming coffee or a 'Blue Henry' [schnapps] the adventures of the preceding day were made light of through wit and humour. In all of this, Adolf Hitler was no spoilsport, on the contrary, he livened things up with his ideas and interruptions – but about his work, he never spoke.[3]

By now, Hitler had the reputation of being a not only 'capable' but also 'strange'; a man who 'lives in his own world'. There was something morbid about him. One day Mend, on his way to Lille, was riding through a swampy field pock-marked with water-filled craters. He noticed 'an infantryman standing with his rifle at his feet. From his stance, I immediately recognized Adolf Hitler.'

> Two dead men, in whom he seemed very interested, lay in front of him. [Hitler] looked around and stretched his head, as though scenting danger. But in spite of the greatest danger to life and limb, he remained next to the dead men. Once he turned in my direction, probably since he had recognized me and wanted to see how I would get through this crater field.[4]

Mend saw Hitler the next day and demanded to know what he had 'found so interesting'. Hitler replied, 'I took a look at two dead men on whom the grass was already growing'. Mend told him 'that it was absolutely unnecessary to remain at that place, unless you wanted to catch moles. Hitler tugged at his moustache, as if to say, "Dispatch rider Mend, you look after yourself, I'll look after myself". Before we parted, I remarked, "Your bones could be lying in that corner of the battlefield at Messines!"'[5]

On 30 November the wearing of the original regimental headgear was finally forbidden. On 8 December, the flags were unfurled and the regiment officially changed its name, though veterans continued to refer to it as the List Regiment for the rest of their lives. Reserve regiments had hitherto been named after their commanders in the belief that this might confuse the enemy. For a regiment that had lost two commanders in less than a month, continuing to name it after the first seemed pointless, particularly as men with no experience of List's command now outnumbered the survivors of Becalaere and Gheluvelt. Despite the change, Solleder maintained that the 'old List spirit' was as strong as ever. Originals

like Hitler still called it the List Regiment and rarely, if ever, the 16th RIR. By 1 December, the combat strength of the regiment was 21 officers and 1,432 other ranks out of a total force of 46 officers and 3,097 other ranks (plus 180 horses). Ten days later it had risen to 1,558 combat officers and men and 1,833 other troops. As fast as reinforcements arrived, they were put to work baling out trenches and repairing cave-ins caused by heavy late-autumn rains. By 8 December, water was 'knee-high' in many trenches, whose condition 'due to the continuing rain defies description'. Tommy was doing his best to 'hinder the drainage work where he could through destructive fire'. On 8 December, repair work and the 'construction of new trenches cost five killed, eight badly wounded and five lightly wounded'. By mid-December all positions were under water, and many a 'trench had to be abandoned and a new one laid out'. Tommy was not having it all his own way.

> It was of small satisfaction to us that the positions of our opponents were just as bad as our own, for the English had also suffered heavily from the mass of water forcing its way into the trenches. Once they tried, by opening the sluice valves, to flood our position but our pioneers had prevented this plan in time... To put it bluntly, the existence of our troops was not to be envied.[6]

On 15 December two-thirds of the regiment was put on 'increased readiness' for a possible British offensive. Headquarters was transferred to Comines on 17 December in response to the 'heavy artillery fire on Messines'. The feared British attack did not eventuate. Had the sorely fatigued troops been placed on alert because of the 'anxiety psychosis of the staff far behind the Frontline'? Or was it justifiable caution? 'In either case the infantry suffered badly because of it.'

> Tommy doesn't come. But he sends his shells... On 15 December, heavy artillery fire begins. One shell strikes the command post of the 2nd Battalion... On the afternoon of 19 December [another] hits the 1st Battalion assembly area in the cloister of Messines and kills four, wounding 26... A few days later, a second hits in the vicinity of the cloister and buries 13 men alive.[7]

The rain eased with the approach of Christmas. Freezing weather meant that the men exchanged one set of miseries for another. As in Russia in the winter of 1941–42, in Belgium in 1914 the German front-line soldier suffered from a lack of warm clothing. Snug in cosy billets, dispatch runners were spared the worst of the conditions. Nevertheless, while the men were overjoyed to receive the generously stocked Christmas packages that arrived from Germany, many would have willingly given them up 'to be home for just an hour on Christmas Eve'. Hitler showed no interest in Christmas packages and spurned offers from comrades who 'showed him their packages and offered him the pick of their luxuries.

He continued to eat his Barras [army bread] with jam and drink from a field flask of tea.' Just before Christmas, Mend questioned whether Hitler had received a Christmas package, only to be told 'he doesn't want one, he allows no one to send one'. Hitler just lay on 'his knapsack, his helmet beside him but his cartridge case unbuckled and his boots still quite dirty'. Mend claimed he could not 'hide a certain pity for Adolf Hitler' and thought to himself, 'the poor devil takes part in so much and yet has no idea for whom in Germany he's endangering his life and risking his health'.[8]

In 1914, the approach of winter and with that the winding down of the northern European battle season marked an intensification of the concerted propaganda campaign being waged on both sides of the line. To Allied propagandists who argued that German *idealism* was a synonym for militarism, the Germans responded not with denials but pride. *Militarismus* was that 'instinctive feeling in each individual, that it is his duty as a human being and citizen of the state to subordinate himself and his personal interests to the interests of the whole, for the good of the Fatherland'.

> Has the German sensibility for artistic and scientific endeavour suffered because of militarism? Have foreign countries surpassed us, above all in the theoretical or practical diversity of science and technology? Everyone knows that our superiority in the most varied branches of industry rests on the combination of science and technology. Is the general level of education higher in any other state? Where are there as many centres of culture as here? Where [are there] fewer illiterates?[9]

The army's inability to defeat France in the first weeks was causing a necessary change in German war writing. Hitler was one of millions exposed to a vigorous propaganda campaign designed, in Fritz Fischer's words, 'to provide the war with a positive philosophy'. Ideas were seized upon, elaborated and popularized by a 'phalanx of publicists of the most various dispensations'. This war was no mere defensive struggle 'against [Germany's] ring of enemies [but] a higher, predestinate necessity rooted in the antithesis between the German spirit [and] the life and forms of her alien enemies', which would offer Germany 'the occasion to rise from a great power to a world power'. It would be won, not through 'fortune on the battlefield, but because [Germany] represented a higher culture fighting in the service of human history'.[10]

Whenever the Western Front was quiet, the war of words became noisier. The lessening of military activity became the signal for the German press to highlight a response by German scientists, writers, artists and academics to the scurrilous material that now formed the essence of the Entente's *Kulturkrieg* against Germany. An appeal 'To the Cultured World' (*Der Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*), signed by 93 of Germany's leading intellectuals and artists, announced that 'We shall wage this fight to the very end as a civilized nation [a] nation that

holds the legacy of Goethe, Beethoven and Kant no less sacred than hearth and home.' In hindsight, the belligerent and arrogant tone of the *Aufruf* was unlikely to persuade neutrals or neutralize the enemy. German propagandists, however, had a field day with some muddle-headed Allied attempts at ridicule. Particularly that by Yves Delage of the French Academy of Sciences, who circuitously argued that since Germans were liars, any attempt by them to refute Allied accusations was further proof of German mendacity! Ironically, some of the most-reasoned criticism of the 'Appeal to the Cultured World' came from within Germany.

> There have been very many replies to this appeal [but] minds which should have won over, have only become more inflamed... [It] is perhaps for the best now to allow deeds to speak for themselves... There are many famous doctors among the outstanding men who have signed this appeal... Any, who today would like to serve over and above his professional calling, can in these times carry or better tend to our wounded warriors, or perform charitable tasks among the widows, orphans and the needy. These are the most necessary and highest cultural deeds that can be accomplished in these hours.[11]

Intended as something far grander, the 'Appeal to the Cultured World' became an invocation to domestic patriotic sentiment. Not all German war publicity was inept at affecting neutral opinion or an embarrassment to German liberal sensibilities. A clever campaign by the *Berliner Tageblatt* against what it called the 'English octopus' was certain to strike a sympathetic chord in Holland, where memories of British treatment of ethnic kinfolk in the Boer War were still fresh. No less adroit was the *Norddeutsche Zeitung*'s reminder to neutral states and Britain's Entente partners that while France had already put 2,000,000 men in the field and, while 'the population of the English motherland is greater than that of France', the British Army was 'scarcely one-fortieth the combined military force of its Entente partners'. Did this not suggest that the British intended to 'save themselves [and] leave the Belgians to their fate'? While France and Russia hoped the British navy would 'seek out and destroy the German [navy] in order to blockade our coast and bring about our overwhelming economic ruin', Britain was finding it very much 'in its interest to take advantage of this opportunity to damage the maritime trade of all nations, Allied as well as neutral, by conducting a pirate war'. Britain's aim was to spare the 'remainder of its fleet and the million-strong army, which it hopes to form in the meantime, so as to dictate peace-terms when the continental powers have exhausted themselves in bloody struggle'.[12]

In a flawed if plausible-seeming argument, Anglo Saxons, with England the real motherland of *Amerikanismus*, were treated as being not merely the enemy of Germandom but of Europe, on whose behalf, Germany, unselfishly, waged war. At the forefront of academics espousing this argument was the world-renowned

professor of political economy, Werner Sombart. His widely reprinted essay 'Our Enemies' first appeared in German newspapers in early November 1914 and may be read as a shorthand sketch for his celebrated *Händler und Helden* (Traders and Heroes) of 1915. Newspapers mentioning or containing Sombart's article arrived while Hitler was at Comines. Sombart's essay groaned under the weight of the kind of racism that Hitler's National Socialists would later make their own, with Serbs derided as 'mouse-trap peddlers' and the Japanese as 'exceptionally clever half-apes', towards whom 'it would be difficult to raise a real human feeling'. Such 'races' left him 'with feelings of revulsion and disgust, and I can't escape the thought that one sullies an honourable weapon when one uses it to fight such people'. Still, he could muster 'no hate' towards them, any more than he might towards the 'cur who chases after your ankles in the street, but can dealt with by a sound thrashing'. Belgium, as 'a political abortion', had no right to existence outside the Reich: he found 'a delicate smattering of the comical' in the idea of 'Belgian "nationality"'.[13]

Sombart's article first appeared in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the paper Norman Angell called 'the chief mouthpiece of enlightened German thought'. While chiding Sombart in its editorial comment over his racism, the *Tageblatt* made it clear that it preferred a harsher approach than Sombart favoured towards Russia, perceiving Germany's survival to be linked to Russia's 'weakening'. But the paper, under the editorial leadership of the Francophile Theodor Wolff, was as sympathetic towards France as was Sombart.

> Fundamentally we have nothing at all 'against the French' [in] spite of their fanatical hatred of Germans, we feel they [merit] our honour and respect as chivalrous opponents, who in their fighting rage are quite certainly a match for us... They are dying for their Fatherland and their final reason for fighting is indeed an ideal one, a belief in glory and greatness beyond the individual, in surrendering the self to a greater whole.[14]

When Germans 'pronounce the word France, memories arise of all the imperishable cultural contributions that these people have given us'. Germany and France were 'of the same spirit, of the same fineness and yet so different' as to be 'endlessly able to give each other so much'.

> I believe that there are many, many among us who silently hope that once again something akin to a mutually appreciative joining of forces may come about, even if in a distant future, which certainly scarcely any of those over fifty among us will experience... A union of German and French cultural elements [offers] a strong furtherance of mankind's purpose.[15]

Sombart felt 'no real hatred towards the Russians' either. For those who argued 'that the soul of the Slavic people is alien to us, then I would like to claim its value in the sense that it is different from ours in the most inward sense'.

> But precisely because of this we need and love it. Its melting softness gives us what we lack. And what the most-differently natured creatures – man and wife – look for in one another, because they need each other, so I would like to say, the souls of the German and Slavic seek [in each other], precisely because they are so foreign to each.[16]

True, Russia was afflicted with 'quite bad Mongolism, from whose grasp Slavdom must first be freed. But this consciousness and feeling that the Russian people possess much that is noble and fine allows no inconsiderate feeling of hatred to escape' from Germans.[17]

Sombart reserved all his hatred for the English. The enmity of Germany and England 'put the seal on the fate of Europe'. A 'flaming hatred of England' aroused by 'the profound mendacity of English politics; the boastful, hollow swinishness of the English press' was shared by 'the whole German people from the last penny-coachman to the highest Reich official'.

> We perceive England to be the enemy. We wage the war against England. We will not consider the war to be finished, before England lies shattered and above all humiliated to its innermost depths at our feet. Were England to be granted an honourable peace, I almost believe that this alone would drive the peaceful German people to revolution. For I have never at any time found the German temperament more passionate as now, when the word England is pronounced.[18]

This 'spontaneous and elemental hatred of England is anchored in the deepest foundations of our being, where the "depths of reason" no longer speak to us, [but] where the "irrational", where instinct alone rules'.[19]

Sombart's anti-English sentiments provided intellectual underpinning for such offerings as Ernst Lissauer's infamous 'Hassgesang auf England' (Song of Hate against England), which was being chanted by German regiments marching into the line in autumn 1914.

Was schiert uns Russe und Franzos,
Schuss wider Schuss und Stoss um Stoss!
Wir lieben sie nicht.
Wir hassen sie nicht...
Wir haben nur einen einzigen Hass,...

(What do we care about Russkies and Frenchies,
Shot against shot and blow for blow!
We don't love them,
We don't hate them...
We have only a single hate,...)[20]

And that, of course, was for England. The effectiveness of such propaganda may be open to doubt. As far as Hitler was concerned, years of racist propaganda had doubtless left their mark, as they had on most Germans and Austrians sharing Hitler's convictions. Even so, well before the *Song of Hate* became popular, the German press had begun to realize that propaganda stressing the British soldier's inadequacies was counterproductive and had begun describing 'Tommy' in terms befitting a German soldier's experience.

A few days before Christmas, Mend was shown a large shell hole near the orderlies' quarters. This was not the only 'Christmas present' received from the British. Solleder described what 'came to pass between the two frontlines [as] the purest humanity'. A regimental orderly, Josef Wenzel, in a letter home, described the events over the Christmas period.

> At 3 o'clock on the morning of 26 December, we were moving forward in the trenches. Everything was frozen hard. [I] prepared myself to be met by heavy fire. But imagine my astonishment when not a shot came. The men we relieved told us that they had been exchanging things with the English, which seemed crazy to us. As proof, I found a few English cigarettes in my dugout, which tasted very good.[21]

Shortly after dawn Englishmen appeared and 'waved to us, to which our people replied'. More men emerged from the trenches; the Germans carried a Christmas tree, which they lit in no-man's-land. 'Everyone [now] moved freely out of the trenches and it would have been unthinkable to have fired a shot. What had seemed crazy a few hours before, I was now able to see with my own eyes.' Bavarians and Englishmen 'until now the fiercest of enemies shook hands, spoke to one another and exchanged things'.

> One came up to me straight away, pressed my hand and passed me a few cigarettes; another gave me a diary, a third signed his name on a field postcard, a fourth wrote his address in my notebook... One Englishman played a German comrade's mouth organ; others danced, others again were immensely proud to put on a German helmet... I will never forget this sight for the rest of my life... Christmas 1914 will be unforgettable to me.[22]

Fraternization also allowed observation. The Germans learnt much about the British trenches, how they were 'laid out in triple lines one behind the other', and noticed weaknesses in their barbed-wire entanglements. Positive impressions Bavarians had formed about Tommy were confirmed. The Englishmen were young on average, the youngest about 15, although there was one private of perhaps 45. Bavarians were also impressed with the quality and abundance of food, particularly the canned beef for which they had already acquired a taste. Most of all, they envied Tommy's equipment and warm clothing. 'All were

impeccably equipped, had lace-up boots, almost all wore goat-fleece pelt jackets, many as well had fur coats.' More Germans spoke English than vice versa, but the men were able to commiserate and communicate. Bavarians were delighted to hear Englishmen complaining of a 'strained relationship' with the French, marked by 'much bickering'. The season of Anglo-German goodwill lasted almost a week, a temporary 'live-and-let-live' interlude with practical side benefits.

> It was a holy time from the 22nd to 29th December [and] the regiment had no losses in dead and wounded to mourn. As Tommy himself kept totally quiet – except on 28 December when at the arrival of a fearful storm rising, as usual from the sea, a few Englishmen left their trenches – our people had plenty of time during the day to improve their positions.[23]

Corporal Hitler did not approve. In 1940 Heinrich Lugauer, a fellow dispatch runner, remembered him as an 'embittered opponent of the fraternization with the English [which] was all the talk in Christmas 1914. This was not something even to debate in wartime.'[24]

The regiment had four days of rest over the New Year period. Its combat strength now reached a peak of 28 officers and 1,766 NCOs and men. Its first day in the trenches 'cost three dead and as many wounded'. On 21 January, Petz was reconfirmed as regimental commander, taking over from the stopgap Lieutenant Colonel von Langlois who had taken seriously ill. There was now one man to every two metres of front, facing continual trench mortar and artillery fire, which caused the 'commander to fear an enemy attack'. Nevertheless, enemy activity was not creating most of the gaps in the regimental front.

> The wet and the cold, the continual state of anxiety and the unaccustomed food cause stomach and intestinal illnesses, from the 1st Battalion alone 80 men report sick. On 13 January the unpopular inoculation against typhus is given. The men, who have not been out of their wet clothes for a week, enjoy for the first time the blessing of a bath in the swimming pool at Comines.[25]

Hitler may even have welcomed the return of unremitting, unrestrained trench warfare. Mend, who thought from Hitler's normally pained expression that 'laughter was alien to him', met him on New Year's Day 'in full marching order'. Hitler's 'pleased expression' suggested he was 'in the best of moods' and on being greeted 'took off his helmet, bowed with a roguish air towards the ground and, helmet in hand, said, "May I wish the indestructible Knight of Messines [Mend] a Happy New Year?"' Mend's comrades who witnessed this 'remarkable greeting', being accustomed to Hitler's moodiness, were much amused. 'Today is one of his good days.'[26]

By now Hitler and the fox terrier, Foxl (a deserter from the British lines), had made one another's acquaintance, which may explain his unusually good humour. Men came and went to the regiment, almost 9,000 of them during the war. Yet, Hitler never commented on the closeness of friendships he may have formed or any loss he may have felt as old comrades were left either killed or severely wounded. In his social-Darwinist worldview, men were born to be killed, so that the fittest among them might prove their worthiness to survive and rule. With a dog, Hitler could allow himself the luxury of affection, even love: 'It was crazy how fond I was of the beast', he admitted in 1942.

> It was in January 1915 that I got hold of Foxl. He was engaged in pursuing a rat that had jumped into our trench. He fought against me, and tried to bite me, but I didn't let go. I led him back with me to the rear. He constantly tried to escape. With exemplary patience (he didn't understand a word of German), I gradually got him used to me. At first I gave him only biscuits and chocolate (he'd acquired his habits with the English, who were better fed than we were). Then I began to train him ... When I had to go up into the line, and there was a lot of shelling, I used to tie him up in the trench. My comrades told me he took no interest in anyone during my absence. He would recognize me even from a distance. What an outburst of enthusiasm he would let loose in my honour![27]

By this time, Hitler, the dog-lover, was acquiring a reputation as a political fanatic. Wiedemann remembers his willingness to lecture and hector his comrades. The loss of many original *Kriegsfreiwillige* and their replacement by conscripts offered Hitler opportunities to preach his versions of pan-Germanism and anti-Semitism. In August 1914, in a regiment of like-minded patriots, Hitler's opinions might hardly have created a stir. As the war dragged on, however, the old political and patriotic certitudes of the original Listers had given way to a broader range of political opinion. From early 1915, Mend remembered a 'very loud' political argument among the orderlies.

> I could hear Adolf Hitler's voice distinctly from outside the room; he must have been in a political debate with an opponent, for he spoke of the black and red danger and the word 'freemason' could be heard as well. In a short while this dispute broke up, when I entered the room and wished everyone a Happy New Year. Hitler stood at the table and cut a piece of *Kommis*, [Kommisbrot, army or ration bread] beside which he set a slice of tinned ham. From his facial expression and body language, I could tell that he was still very agitated.[28]

Mend sought to make light of the dispute: 'Who among you is going to be chancellor after the next election?', he asked. 'Adolf Hitler', joked one of the orderlies, 'and I'll be finance minister'. Neither Hitler nor his antagonist thought

much of the joke. 'What Hitler says is rubbish', the latter continued. It was not in Germany's interest 'to hunt the Jews out of the land [for] we need Jewish capital, without which we won't be able to fight the war'. 'In our party', he added, 'we have many Jews, who protect working-class interests better than Christians.' Hitler continued eating his tinned ham, then 'turned towards the speaker'.

> Although I'm an Austrian, I understand German nature better than you do. You can preach your Red evangelism to Jews and Marxists, but at least leave us in peace... Sure, I always think in social terms, but I am no traitor, I feel myself to be a German and am conscious of my race. Every decent man is more or less a Socialist, national and social work quite well in unison.[29]

The two men became 'more and more violent and it wouldn't have taken much for a brawl to erupt'. Some orderlies took Hitler's side, while others, 'tinged with Red', took the side of his opponent. Mend laughed at the altercation and asked the combatants to 'calm down, what you're fighting over you can do nothing about... front soldiers are excluded from the political decision making'. The quarrel was not over yet. Mend was now accused of class-betrayal, of associating, too often in peacetime, 'with barons and counts' and of adjusting his politics accordingly. Hitler sympathized, but blamed Germandom's problems on the 'exploitative system of Jewish bankers, particularly in Austria', adding that if he had the power, he would 'free the Germanic race from the Jewish parasites and send these racial despoilers and people exploiters to Palestine'. Laughter followed but his debater, a 'card-carrying Social Democrat, made a resigned face'. After Hitler left the room, Mend asked the others 'what is it with Hitler? I'm still not clear what he stands for, whether he's a Social Democrat or a monarchist.' Later Mend told Hitler that he received most of his income from Jews and knew them to give 'a great deal for charitable purposes'. Hitler was unmoved: if 'Isador' made 100 marks profit then he might give 50 pfennig to the poor, provided he received publicity as a benefactor and got a good name. 'The Jewish capitalist knows how to benefit from poverty, even if the only profit it yields him is the reputation as a benefactor.'[30]

With the festive season over, trench warfare returned. The battlefield was abandoned to the 'courage of the numerically superior enemy guns [which] strain, drill, hammer, drum on even the nerves of the most foolhardy of the foolhardy, the most daring of the daring [in] constant contact with the dead'. Aware that the Germans had transferred divisions to the Eastern Front in the hope of a decisive breakthrough, the western Allies began stepping up raids, not only to help the Russians, but to probe for weaknesses in the German line. By February, the Germans expected an Allied offensive and the List Regiment was told its sector 'must be held to the last man'. Between Christmas and the onset of March, the regiment lost 45 men killed, some from raids, others due to artillery and mortar fire. By the time Balthaser Brandmayer entered the

trenches, the 'live-and-let-live' phase of the Christmas and New Year was a blessed memory.[31]

The Western Front offered a rapid learning experience. Hitler was already a battle-hardened veteran before Brandmayer had completed basic training. Brandmayer would prove himself a good soldier, who, like most other men, hated war. The pacifistic tone of his observations and his admissions of feeling fear, or even terror, fitted poorly with the 'tough as leather hard as Krupp steel' image of Aryan manhood in the Third Reich. While his admiration for the courage of the cold-hearted cold-blooded Hitler, with his pathological disregard of death, shines through his writing, Brandmayer, after 1933, was no suitable man to be praising the new Caesar. Even if Brandmayer believed Hitler to be ahead of his times in recognizing the 'Jewish menace', this could not compensate for a lack of commitment to National Socialist ideology, while his humanitarianism ran counter to the whole Nazi *Weltanschauung*.

Brandmayer's career as an infantryman in the List Regiment began at Messines on 17 February 1915. As he crawled into a Western Front trench for the first time, it seemed 'every shot must find its mark. Fear of death threw us newcomers to earth, much to the amusement of the old hands.' Nor did the trenches seem to offer protection to a man who was a bricklayer in civilian life: these were 'plastered with timber lattice-work, the dug-outs badly extended'. After a brief orientation, it became his 'not particularly pleasant lot' to be sent to a forward listening post in no-man's-land.

> Unknown territory lies before me. I pick up my ears; bursts of intermittent fire from English machine guns terrify me. In my deluded state, I imagine I can see death and the devil, until the person beside me brings me to my senses with scolding and curses. Patrols and sentries change over. In the evening the enemy artillery fire lights to sky.[32]

Brandmayer survived his first day of trench life. Back at the rest quarters he was told of the capture of 100,000 Russians on the Eastern Front, which brought 'jubilation and enthusiasm [and] lifted our courage'. With enemy artillery activity 'stronger by the hour', the Bavarians became nervous. Heavy shells launched from a British warship off the coast were crashing into the German positions. 'A hail of shots tore howling through the air. Carefully constructed dug-outs were shattered and new ones flung open.' Then, in the 'pitch-black' of night, the regiment was relieved, the men told to expect 14 days 'escape from this bath of steel'. On the evening of 9 March, after a brief rest, they set out on a seven-hour march to Tourcoing, where they arrived at sunrise, exhausted and expecting 24-hours sleep. This was not to be. They were woken at midday by alarms 'from all directions . . . An hour later we find ourselves sitting in a military train, where this would take us no one knows. [Some] suspect that we will be going to Russia, others to Lorraine.' Low-lying rain clouds 'creep across the blood-sated battlefields of Flanders. The over-loaded train rolls slowly and carefully into

the deepening night. We freeze, scarcely a word is spoken.' At Lille, they disembarked to the 'incessant thunder of death-dealing batteries' in the distance. The men set off, marching to a destination some 10 miles away, near Neuve Chapelle, where 'English regiments have broken through the German frontline.'[33]

6

NEUVE CHAPELLE 1915

> There has been a little pheasant shooting. Life would be a pleasant picnic if it were not for the Germans.
>
> – *Times*, 9 March 1915[1]

A week after the battle, a British assessment called Neuve Chapelle 'one of the heaviest engagements of the Western Front of the war', with the writer devoting a panegyric to the 'thousands of men [who] attacked and defended day after day with the greatest energy and fierceness'. Accordingly, the principal features of this battle were 'the murderous artillery fire which preceded the attack, the brilliant series of sweeping charges by the British, and the resultant success of an important position won and held in spite of repeated counter-attacks'. Wounded Tommies were 'borne from the field laughing and singing out of the sheer joy of battle'. Neuve Chapelle signalled the 'end of the long imprisonment in the trenches, and its opening of that spring campaign which [was] the preliminary step towards the great movement which is to hurl the German out of Flanders and of France'. Even so, the enemy would only 'be moved by a long series of Neuve Chapelles. He has to be fought again and again, and defeated again and again, in pitched battles of just that calibre.'[2]

For the British, Neuve Chapelle was treated as a victory and would be described by them as such throughout the Great War. History has not dealt kindly with this judgement. Nothing would have pleased the Germans more than a series of similar battles, where a few resolute German troops held up 48 British battalions and inflicted inordinate casualties. Although Neuve Chapelle *was* one of only three occasions in the war where the British were able to pierce the German line and look out over the verdant fields beyond, Alan Clark's summation that the British '1st Army had, although "gaining valuable experience", suffered a defeat' seems indisputable. Still, the Germans did not have it all their own way. For the 6th BRD, thrown into the line in a fruitless counter-attack (again without proper artillery support), Neuve Chapelle was another bloody offensive for which there was little to show. In its description of the 6th BRD's part in the

battle, the Bavarian official history reserved its criticisms for the German (Prussian) organization.

> In order to recapture the lost territory, the 6th BRD, which had just been withdrawn from its position by Messines, was driven up to support the VII Corps. The division entered battle not in collective bodies. Regiments, battalions, detachments, companies and batteries were thrown into the battlefield as soon as they arrived at the railway station, and were divided up among the Prussian troop formations. A motley crew was the consequence.[3]

It is unlikely that the Prussian bureaucrats at OHL were prepared to accept a battlefield bungle (for which some of them may have been in part responsible) as offering extenuating circumstances. After all, this Bavarian reserve division in question had failed to hold on to Wytschaete and Gheluvelt, and after Neuve Chapelle the 6th BRD would never again be used in a first-line assault role. It was as a 'garrison' or 'trench' – *Stellungsdivision* – in 1915–16 that it would come into its own. Under a renowned *Stellungsgeneral* in a defensive role in the sector by Fromelles, it inflicted, on attacking British and dominion units, some of the worst carnage on the Western Front in the Great War.

Bavarians who, over the Christmas truce, had observed the lack of love between Tommy and *poilu* were told by their papers that merely declaring an Entente Cordiale could not do away with 1,000 years of Anglo-French enmity. The British commander-in-chief, Sir John French, while no Francophobe, was a 'weak-willed man' who, although 'amiable enough', was inclined to become 'petulant when thwarted'. Sir John was ill suited to the diplomatic (and military) demands of the job. In French eyes he had blotted his copybook by his vacillating and uncooperative conduct in the British withdrawal after Mons, when he appeared more interested in finding a safe haven from where the British force might be evacuated than in joining in a stand against the Germans. As much by good luck as management, his six divisions finished in the right place at the right time. Their presence and stubbornness played crucial roles, significant beyond numbers, on the Marne and Aisne, and later in blocking Falkenhayn's thrust on the Channel ports.[4]

By March 1915, little had been heard of the BEF since the end of winter, almost nothing in attack. At this time the Allies enjoyed a temporary superiority in manpower and matériel and since both *Entente* partners agreed that the only way to defeat Germany was by offensive action, the timing now could hardly be bettered. After the failure, 'not merely a failure, but a fiasco', of a joint Anglo-French winter offensive (in waterlogged Flanders and Artois), French Grand Quartier Général (GQG) now thought that while the BEF might be 'helpful to hold the line and act defensively', it was of 'little use in an attack'. The Germans thought likewise. They had taken 'every available man, gun and shell from the Western Front preparatory to their great offensive against Russia [and] their

contempt for the abilities of the British Army – in an offensive role at least – had led them to denude their front in that sector even more extravagantly than elsewhere'. A lack of British aggression and the slow rate of voluntary recruitment encouraged German propagandists to predict their 'cousins' would make only a token contribution to the war and let Germany and France fight themselves to a standstill. With their rivals mortally weakened, the British would then establish Anglo Saxon hegemony over Western Europe. In a variation on this theme, the *Kölnische Zeitung* sided with 'Easterners' who reasoned that Russia must be disposed of first. To do otherwise might expose Europe to the tragedy of *Anglo-Russian* domination.

> English and Russian longings for supremacy are embracing Europe. Everything that lies between them is to be divided up... The Central Powers alone are resisting the mighty attempt to make the world English and Russian... It is for Europe that the fight is waged – for the conception of nationality, right, and culture, which the name of Europe embraces.[5]

To both French and Germans, 'voluntarism' seemed a casual way of swelling the ranks; at the present rate it would be years before the British Empire could muster a force comparable to those of the continental powers. While dominion publicists and politicians were fond of promising how they would 'stand by the Empire until the last man and to the last shilling', seven months into the war few dominion soldiers had fired a shot in anger. German propagandists argued that the outbreak of 'world war' merely delayed an Irish civil war presaging the break-up of the British empire, and scoffed at dominion soldiers as 'mercenary riffraff... colonial rowdies [who] might frighten old women and rob and plunder [but] can do nothing against serious national forces'.[6]

By February 1915 Sir John French, impelled by 'vital considerations', realized that 'a vigorous offensive movement' by the forces under his command 'should be planned and carried out at the earliest possible moment'. Given the number of Indian divisions in Flanders, it was obvious that these men, who the Germans disparaged as 'coloured Englishmen', would play a prominent part in any British offensive. With the addition of Irish regiments and the presence of some of the first Canadians to arrive at the Western Front, the attacking force could be seen as representative of a united empire. Thus, Neuve Chapelle in March, along with Second Ypres and Gallipoli in April, can be seen as a series of battles demonstrating that the Empire – symbolized in cartoons by a snarling lioness surrounded by aggressive dominion cubs – would attack where possible, and defend to death when necessary.[7]

An attack towards the Aubers Ridge in the direction of Lille appeared to offer an excellent chance of success. The German position around Neuve Chapelle was held by just three battalions sited behind a single sandbagged breastwork, which, in its turn, was protected by two flimsy strands of portable barbed wire.

So confident was the First Army commander Sir Douglas Haig that he boasted of being able to 'walk through the German line in several places'. Haig planned for a 'battering ram' attack against the Germans 'as soon as possible'. For practical as well as psychological and publicity reasons, the British would carry this out 'independently of any action by the French'. Should the situation develop favourably and British troops seize the Aubers Ridge, French cooperation was assured. From Aubers the Allies might even capture Lille, whose fall in early October 1914 had become a gross embarrassment to the Allies. So much so that for the rest the year, its imminent recapture became an *idée fixe* in Entente reporting. It is easy to imagine the mixture of laughter and anger with which German soldiers greeted an account by the *Times* Special Correspondent on 31 October 1914, which claimed with 'unimpeachable authority that the Allies have reoccupied Lille'.[8]

The desire to be the commander responsible for recapturing northern France's industrial heart turned more than one British general's head, leading to three of the most concentrated mass slaughters in the war. Hitler and the List Regiment were involved in all three. An offensive described as 'the predecessor of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle' had already been mounted before Christmas 1914. In sub-zero weather, the Germans had cut off this planned 'sharp attack' near Fromelles before it got underway; an offensive which proved so 'completely abortive' that all 'details were removed from [British] public news'. The March 1915 attack at Neuve Chapelle was better planned, and executed on a vastly greater scale. By now, Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig realized that more than British pluck and cold steel were needed to mount successful offensives against a skilled, resolute and well-equipped enemy on a twentieth-century modernist battlefield.[9]

In early March 1915, while the List Regiment was still at Menin, Haig's heavy guns were being dragged across waterlogged fields to their allotted positions, their shells stockpiled in spectacular dumps. The rear areas of the Armentières-La Bassée sector were 'absolutely choked with men, G-wagons, temporary bivouacs, long lines of horses standing patiently'. A mêlée of some 40,000 infantrymen from 48 battalions, representing a mixture of regular, Indian, Territorial and New Army units, as well as two corps of cavalry (one British, one Indian) struggled across the fields and through the congested lanes and roads of Flanders. Since surprise was a prerequisite, the work had to be done over 10 nights before the battle: Lyn Macdonald suggests that the 'groans and curses of a thousand working parties might have been heard in Berlin'. This labour had not dampened the men's optimism. 'We had a very fair idea of the ground to be covered', wrote a lance corporal of the Black Watch. This rose gradually 'towards the village of Aubers and we knew that about nine miles beyond was the city of Lille. We were hopeful and innocent enough to believe that there would be cozy billets for us in Lille on the night of the battle.' His confidence must have been boosted by Haig's 'Special Order to the 1st Army' of 9 March. Where the British had hitherto been opposed to 'an enemy vastly superior both in men and guns', reinforcements had 'made us stronger than the enemy on our front'.

> We are about to attack with about 48 Battalions a locality in that front which is held by some three German Battalions. It seems probable also that for the first day of the operations the Germans will not have more than four Battalions available as reinforcements for the counter attack... At no time in this war has there been a more favourable moment for us, and I feel confident of success.[10]

Not everyone in Haig's command was sanguine. Allenby of the cavalry corps felt the Front for the assault 'should be broadened so as to avoid the possibility of confusion in the bottleneck during the follow through'. Haig, also a cavalryman, censured Allenby with a reference to his 'unfamiliarity with commanding masses of infantry'. Allenby's, not Haig's, judgement proved correct. For propaganda purposes, the Germans deliberately mistranslated Haig's order.

> We are about to engage the enemy under very favourable conditions. The French [have] achieved success in Champagne [because] the Germans, in whose land famine and unrest reigns, have had to weaken their front. The English will have the heaviest guns that have ever been used in battle and [our] 48 battalions are ready. It is essential for England to fight for the overthrow of the German barbarians.[11]

The battle of Neuve Chapelle began at 7:30 on the morning of 10 March 1915. The preliminary bombardment was of a concentrated intensity unmatched by the British until Third Ypres in July 1917. An 'eye-witness' attached to British GHQ likened the 'discharges of the guns [to] the fire of a gigantic machine-gun'. After 35 minutes, the guns were stilled and 'the signal for the attack was given'. In less than 30 minutes almost all the 'German trenches in and about Neuve Chapelle were in our hands'. Another report, from the official (capitalized) 'Eye-Witness', described German trenches as being 'literally blotted out in places, filled with dead and dying partially buried in earth and debris, and with the majority of survivors in no mood for further fighting'. In parts of the field, survivors 'were surrendering in groups'.[12]

It is sometimes argued – by historians who feel Haig has long been unfairly misjudged – that Neuve Chapelle was the first lesson in a course on practical war-making in which he gradually got things right. By forgetting most of what followed in 1915, 1916 and 1917 and then considering 1918 in isolation, one might reach such a conclusion. Still, the first lesson of Neuve Chapelle (and there were several) was that an intense artillery barrage of relatively brief duration (after which the attacking infantry waves swarmed immediately into the enemy trenches) could produce a positive result. By these means, the British managed to capture Neuve Chapelle village and pierce the German frontline. Fifteen months later, on the first day of the Somme, a week-long artillery bombardment of sporadic intensity had been followed by a leisurely stroll across the battlefield by overloaded British infantrymen who were cut down in swathes. What successes

were achieved on that day were achieved by two British commanders who chose to ignore orders and have their men follow close behind the barrage, in close-support attacking waves *à la* Neuve Chapelle. In fairness to Haig, the British were not alone in failing to recognize what was achieved in the first hour at Neuve Chapelle. At Sixth Army headquarters, Rupprecht ignored the initial British success and concentrated instead on the overall inadequacy of the British barrage.

> 'To me it seems, for lack of a productive artillery preparation, that this attack is somewhat risky', said the crown prince. 'It would have been better first of all to let the cannons complete their work and then set out on the attack.' Everyone agreed with the crown prince. 'All the officers of the army high command who were present therefore had the impression', wrote the chief of the general staff, General Krafft von Dellmensingen for the official record, 'that the attack was too rushed and that there was no need for concern about its outcome!'[13]

Still, piercing of the German line was a formidable public-relations success: British troops had penetrated into open country where 'birds could be heard. After fetid months in winter dugouts the air was fresh and clean.' Yet, the British were unprepared to follow up their success. Men awaiting permission to advance 'stood about chatting' and finally, when support troops arrived, these were engineers with instructions 'to set to work constructing trenches and erecting wire'. With them came word from divisional HQ that 'no further advance was practicable'.[14]

This British success at the Neuve Chapelle village was localized. Elsewhere the attack had failed. To the north, there had been no heavy artillery bombardment at all, since the guns entrusted with this were still in England. Instead, the Germans were exposed to the relatively gentle fire of 18 pounders, which did little damage and alerted to a coming attack. The British official history describes how 'It was at first thought that the attack had succeeded [as] no one behind could see and not a man returned.' No man could return since they were all dead or wounded. The Germans now opened with a 'vicious enfilade fire that swept diagonally across No-Man's Land'. Scottish troops sent out to attack the adjoining section of trenches lost 90 per cent of their officers killed. With a decision by the commanding brigadier to throw still more troops into the cauldron the situation turned farcical. Only receipt of an order from divisional HQ that all troops withdraw to a 'safe distance' – pending a further bombardment of the enemy position – averted a massacre. By now there were stoppages and tactical withdrawals all along the Front, yet support battalions still pushed forward in accordance with their timetable. The result was chaotic. Fresh troops, unclear of their objectives, floundered in a maze of shell holes and confusion where they were cut down by the flanking fire of German snipers and machine-gunners. Behind them, in that bottlenecked narrow-fronted advance Allenby feared, troops from the remaining battalions still tried to push on in a milling mass. They had become

'useless cannon-fodder [only] the weakness of the enemy artillery at that time allowed what was, for all too many, an extra twenty-four hours of life'.[15]

The urgency permeating Haig's order to the First Army was based on the knowledge that after the first day, the Germans could be reinforced by troops from Lille, principally the 6th BRD. Even before these men could be brought up, however, a division of Prussian regulars, the 14th, was ordered to 'recapture Neuve Chapelle'. On the evening of 10 March, precise instructions arrived.

> Major-General von Ditfurth will carry out the attack on Neuve Chapelle. In case the troops at his disposal are not sufficient for the recapture of our former positions west of the village, the 14th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Brigade is placed at General von Ditfurth's disposal. This Brigade must be in position in the Bois du Biez at 6 a.m. on the 11th.[16]

This brigade consisted of the List Regiment's sisters, the 20th and 21st RIRs of the 6th BRD. As at Gheluvelt and Becalaere, the division was again split up. There was no mention yet when the List Regiment might see action. Since the whole division was now marching from Tourcoing to the vicinity of the Bois du Biez, this could not be long. And now, the British were not the only ones facing difficulties in moving masses of troops around northern France. With many of his Bavarian assault troops having lost their way in the maze of Flemish lanes and the confusion of a moonless night, on the morning of the 11th von Ditfurth postponed the scheduled counter-attack, ordering the troops' withdrawal to positions around Aubers. This was as well for both Ditfurth and the troops. Two divisions – one which had been holding the line and digging in for two days and nights and the other which had been on the march for two days and nights – would hardly have been fit to launch an aggressive counter-attack against relatively fresh and well-entrenched British troops. Indeed, given the Western Front pattern, the Germans almost assuredly would have been massacred.

A massacre did take place that day. In a gruesome coincidence, the British also planned and undertook a morning attack, timed for seven o'clock and preceded by a *15-minute* bombardment. The battlefield that morning was shrouded in fog. With the gunners forced to fire blind, this barrage became a hazardous, irresponsible undertaking of which the most likely victims were British, wounded lying in the battlefield. Worse, since the Germans, unseen by the British, had moved into new trenches dug during the night, the British bombardment fell in what was now no-man's-land, and achieved no more than warning the Germans of a coming attack. That morning the British infantry went over the top with the fog lifting, allowing German guns to range in on the attacking troops with devastating effect: those who made it through were mown down by machine-gunners in nests before the Bois du Biez. British casualties numbered 'thousands'. All that was left of Neuve Chapelle was 'a heap of smoking ruins'. Still Haig refused to recognize the scale of the British reverse, or draw the appropriate conclusions. When it was clear that no progress was possible, all he could think of was to order the guns be

brought up closer to the Front and for the attack to be continued by the remnants of the British force at 10 the next morning. Yet that morning it was the Germans' turn to beat the British to the counter-attack, striking first with a monumental blunder of their own. They saved Haig from launching his own ill-considered attack and possibly saved his career as well.[17]

With the battlefield littered with British dead and wounded, the Germans calculated that the timing for a counter-attack could not be better than the morning of 12 March 1915. So confident was von Ditfurth that he approved a counter-attack for 5:30 a.m., *without the benefit of artillery preparation.* He ignored the difficulties faced by the 6th BRD during its march from Halpegarde to, and through, the Bois du Biez, but worst of all in this chronicle of blunders, failed to coordinate the operations of the two divisions involved. When the Bavarians and Prussians finally joined up, it was under fire on the battlefield, where they seemed to be operating under different orders. But before they could even sight the Prussians, the Bavarians had to deal with the tangle and deadly chaos of the sodden Biez Wood.

> The swamp in Biez Wood will remain unforgettable to all who survive it. Some leave their boots still stuck [in the mud] and march on bare-footed. Others throw their packs away in order to keep up with the other troops. Bullets whistle sporadically through the trees, otherwise everything is as still as death, the quiet before the storm...
>
> At 5:30 in the morning, the troops stand at the launch off points ready for attack, which surprisingly they will have to carry out without an extensive artillery preparation. 'Fix bayonets!'
>
> With Hurrahs they run forwards against the enemy [who] lays down murderous artillery, small arms and machine-gun fire... The area is wrapped in an extraordinary sea of fire. In the assault, a broad stream has to be leapt [but] most cannot make the jump and fall up to their chests in the water. Onwards! Onwards![18]

Brandmayer was among these attacking troops. He had been 'torn from a restless slumber' at two on the morning of the 12th and found himself in a stream of reinforcements trekking from Halpegarde towards the Bois du Biez. A few hours later, on the outskirts of the wood, the men were 'surrounded by a deathly silence. Its effect is eerie. The calm before the storm. At 6 o'clock, all hell breaks loose.'

> Steel rains down on the assault troops. We advance through the Biez wood. Trees crash down, the copse is crushed into thousands of splinters and fragments. The land is swamp and morass, filth clings to our boots... At the edge of the wood [we] swarm out. The going is tough. We charge towards the enemy. Shrapnel whizzes a hair's breadth above my head. Our artillery is ineffective. The air is impregnated with smoke

> and cordite. My group leader falls, badly wounded... He wallows in his own blood, we must still keep advancing. It is raining. The wounded cry and whimper and rattle. Help is not possible. The swarming assault lines are caught in a storm. I stray towards the ruined house in front of a communication trench. Schmitt stands there, pistol drawn, screaming: 'Keep going, I'll shoot you,... shoot you!' It seems hours later that a shrapnel ball hits me. From the back of my neck warm blood trickles down my back. I lie in the field until the onset of darkness, when merciful comrades drag me to the first-aid station... The horror of this attack puts the first silver streaks in my hair.[19]

Other Listers pushed on and sought to link up with 'Prussians in the first line', but the Prussians were being so 'hard pressed by the enemy' that they now '*retreated* towards the *Ferme de Biez*'. A Bavarian battalion commander attempted 'to drive the fleeing Prussian troops forwards again', but as they had already 'suffered too heavily under enemy fire in recent days, no further combined assault was possible'. There was, however, at least one successful Bavarian–Prussian collaboration when, 'after bloody close-combat fighting, man against man, the trenches in the area to the south-east of Neuve Chapelle were snatched from the English and held in spite of all attempts to retake them'. Otherwise the advance floundered 'against the superior weight of the enemy force. Across the whole field, dead and wounded lay piled beside one another.'

> The morning had almost been used, but the impetus of the forward thrust [had] not succeeded in throwing the [numerically] superior [and] unshaken enemy out of his well-constructed positions. Our command now decided to let the heavy artillery do its work, and then achieve its aims in a new assault set for 12 noon. But the English responded with a barrage of all calibres on our frontal position and the land to the rear, as had never previously been seen on the Western Front. Enemy machine-gun fire showered our brave troops with a hail of bullets, so that before their offensive could come into being it was already at a standstill.[20]

Mend described the land as 'covered in smoke and sulphur fumes, in the air was a constant flash of exploding shrapnel [and] exploding shots [which] flung masses of earth to the height of a house. At the beginning I didn't know where the shots were coming from since the enemy was [firing] at all the roads that led to Neuve Chapelle.' At the divisional first-aid posts, doctors battled manfully to treat the flood of wounded: of 638 wounded men treated, 374 were from the List Regiment. The British barrage became the prelude to a belated and feeble British counter-attack by worn-out troops. Gradually the cannon and rifle fire petered out. After a while all that could be 'detected was the ratt-tatt-tatt of a solitary machine gun'. Then even that ceased. By dusk, it was all over. The regimental history records how

> [as] daylight fell, all hope of recapturing Neuve Chapelle dwindled. In the night the groans and cries of the severely wounded, who lay between the lines and to whom no aid could be brought, was heart rending. Any attempt undertaken by comrades cost new victims.
>
> For the first time success had been denied to the regiment, which weighed heavy on officers and men. But the fault lay not with the will to victory of our brave troops. They had achieved all that was humanly possible.[21]

Mend went to a first-aid post where doctors were laying out the wounded. 'The air in the room was suffocating. One man, whose leg had been shot off, acknowledged me with his eyes, I would have been sick if I had not left the room quickly.' Dead Germans and Britons lay behind the house, among them 'a young Irishman, blood-matted curls hanging down over the face, still ruddy with life, who gave the impression of being asleep'. At the nearby cemetery at Aubers the 'remains of dead men lay around as though scattered by the wind. Dead English and German soldiers were strung in lines out near one another. Several soldiers were busily digging mass graves, piling in the corpses and then soaking them with quicklime.'[22]

In his five months as a dispatch runner, Hitler had never experienced 'such heavy fire'. His task was to bring messages from the regimental headquarters at Halpegarde through a 'way that had literally been dug up by shells' into the Bois du Biez. From there he had to find his way across the dangerously exposed country to the Bavarian assault battalions who were now mixed up with Prussians all the way to the British positions at Neuve Chapelle. Battlefield confusion was adding an extra dimension to the dispatch runners' load.

> The confusion came into being because the different formations from our regiment, as they disembarked from their trains, were immediately marched to the Front and had gone into action, on their own account, between Prussian troops. The battle orderlies, Hitler, Lippert, Schmidt and Weiss had the task, in so far as possible, to re-establish the connection, which was made all the more difficult by the frightful fire and the soggy ground under-foot. Hitler said later in Fournes that he had to deliver reports by creeping forward from one shell-hole to another, and that sometimes the sulphur fumes only allowed him to see 10 metres to the Front.[23]

While waiting, Hitler paced 'around like a restless tiger in the farm at Halpegarde…Even the colonel said: "I can scarcely believe that my orderlies can come through this fire."' By now, all contact between battalions had broken down and 'the difficult task of re-establishing it' was left to dispatch runners. Petz, sitting by the map in Halpegarde, was 'striking the table in rage: "How shall I give orders then, when I don't know where my people are?"'[24]

Hitler seems to have thrived in this battle, going about his duties with 'a spring in his step and unworried as always'. While he believed himself chosen by Fate for greater things, he was more than ready to give Fate a helping hand, never neglecting 'to pick out on the map those points on the way that could be dangerous to him'. He was said to be 'as cunning as a fox [who] knows exactly when to keep his head down. During a barrage on the position the day before yesterday...no one could have shown more care!' Even so, the risks were considerable. 'If anyone is sent out to the trenches today', one orderly was quoted as saying, 'he will be lucky to come back. The fire is fearsome. If I am caught today, I can only hope I do not have to suffer for too long.' Hitler was unperturbed, strapping 'his dispatch case on so tightly that it would take a day to get it off. He should get a decoration today. However, he has to be careful not to get his head blown off first.' He did not win a decoration but did confirm his value. Petz stated that 'when he needed a reliable man for an important report, [he] called for Hitler': as well as bravery, a good dispatch runner needed 'intelligence and sharp wits'. After Neuve Chapelle, Hitler's virtues were 'well known among the regimental staff'.[25]

The German communiqué of 13 March 1915 stated: 'After early successes, our prepared attack to reoccupy the village of Neuve Chapelle was met by strong English superiority and was therefore not carried further.' On 14 March, the List Regiment was relieved. At last, the men thought, they would have their promised leave. Instead, they were marched up the road to trenches at Fromelles and quarters in Fournes. That day Rupprecht issued this Order of the Day.

> Soldiers! By deploying 48 battalions against three, the enemy has succeeded, despite the heroic opposition of the occupying troops, in taking away a tiny fraction of our position. We have failed to recapture it. But your attack has broken the enemy's enterprise. Two enemy army corps have not ventured to push on from the captured village, whose possession is of secondary importance. I express my thanks [and] my warmest appreciation for your fighting courage and your sacrifice....[26]

A successful British thrust in the direction of Lille would be of grave concern to the Germans. But no matter how importantly Neuve Chapelle might be regarded in the British Empire or in the Kingdom of Bavaria, the battle was still a relatively minor affair that warranted barely two pages in the massive German official history. In this same source, the counter-attack of 12 March was glossed over, with no mention made of chaos in the German ranks.

> Westphalens, Saxons and Bavarians undertook a combined assault on the trenches to the northeast of the village. As a consequence of the weakness of their own artillery however, they suffered such heavy losses, that a strong enemy counter-attack, employed towards midday was able to force them back to their exit positions.[27]

Apart from the loss of the village, this failed counter-attack was the only less-than-positive outcome of the three-day battle. Most importantly, 'the planned British breakthrough to Lille had not succeeded. A compilation of German casualties for the period from 9 to 20 March totals 10,000 men'.[28]

The Bavarian official history devoted 2 out of 600 pages to Neuve Chapelle. It acknowledged the battlefield muddle, but then went on to blame the British superiority in guns and a powerful British counter-offensive for the Germans' failure. 'In view of the extreme conditions and the brotherly sacrifice of the Bavarian and Prussian regiments, one can be thankful that finally the powerful assault of the enemy bogged down in blood and mud. A renewed attack of our own quickly broke down against the might of the enemy guns.' As a final it added a chilling casualty statistic: in three days, the 6th BRD had lost, killed, wounded, missing and captured, over 70 officers and 3,000 men, the equivalent of a complete regiment and 30 per cent of all German casualties at Neuve Chapelle. Since Neuve Chapelle was the first serious British offensive on the Western Front and celebrated with great fanfare throughout the Empire, it is scarcely surprising that Edmonds should devote no less than 84 pages to it. Describing it as an 'important landmark in trench warfare', he acknowledged that while it had 'demonstrated that a break-in was possible under certain conditions', nevertheless the enemy had shown, as 'British troops had shown at Ypres, the tremendous value of a few brave men holding on in strong points and isolated trenches.'[29]

7

FROMELLES 1915

For the rest of the war, Germans continued to make occasional propaganda over the 'triumph' of 3 battalions over 48 at Neuve Chapelle, while the British still preferred to describe it as the first in a series of British victories based on 'constantly improving tactics born of hard won experience'. Two months after Neuve Chapelle the BEF launched another more extensive and broadly based attack, on a five-mile front between Festubert and Fromelles, for which Neuve Chapelle was meant to serve as the model. In this vein, on 4 April 1915 GHQ issued a memo stating that, given adequate preparation and 'thorough previous registration of the enemy's trenches by our artillery', a sector of the enemy's 'frontline defence' might – *à la* Neuve Chapelle – 'be captured with comparatively little loss'. GHQ's over-confidence infected the lower ranks, with officers openly stating that 'this should be Neuve Chapelle all over again, and much more successful because we have learnt its lessons and shall know what to avoid this time'. But the Germans had also learnt from Neuve Chapelle. Instead of two, three German divisions – two Prussian and one Bavarian – now faced the British on the Festubert–Fromelles front. The 6th BRD held the northernmost position, with the List Regiment responsible for a key position, on the so-called Sugarloaf, which protected Fromelles. While their loss of the Neuve Chapelle village was, in the German view, of minor tactical significance, it had been a propaganda setback. The German frontline had been pierced and the British, with better battlefield organization and a reasonable follow-up plan, might have been able to threaten Lille. To ensure there would be no repetition, in mid-March 1915 the German infantry and pioneers of these three divisions began working around the clock to turn their sector into as near impregnable a fortress as feverish activity and Teutonic efficiency could make it.[1]

The action that the British called the 'Battle of Aubers Ridge' was described by the Bavarians who took part in it as the 'Action (Gefecht) by Fromelles'. Otherwise it was treated by the Germans as a relatively minor confrontation that formed part of what the Bavarian official history called 'The Spring Battle of La Bassée – Arras; 9 May to 23 July 1915': a Western Front battle on a major scale in which the part played by the BEF was relatively minor and subsidiary to that

of the French. Minor and subsidiary, but critical nevertheless, and no more so than at Fromelles, where the attacking British troops were meant to overrun the Bavarian position, capture Fromelles and push on to cut the Lille – La Bassée road some three miles beyond. Had this happened, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to reinforce the German front between La Bassée and Arras, where a French offensive of unprecedented weight and power would be mounted. As it transpired, the British never came within sight of the Lille – La Bassée road. The Bavarian official history accurately describes the attackers' fate and the limits of their achievement.

> In the fulfillment of a promise that General French, the English supreme commander, had given to the French military leadership, on 9 May the IV English corps attacked to the north-west of this village [Fromelles]. The assault met, in the centre of the 6th BRD, the 16th RIR. At 7 a.m., two heavy mine explosions, which buried alive six groups of trench garrison troops, enabled the enemy to break into the position of the 16th RIR to a depth of some 200 metres. The flood was dammed thanks to the bitter opposition of the remaining troops... as well as the help of neighbouring troops from the 21st and 17th RIRs, while the well placed fire of the artillery made it impossible for the English to reinforce their troops. In hard fighting the Front-line trenches was retaken during the day. Then the enemy, who had been drawn deep into the position and then cut off, were wiped or hunted down. The desire for further attacks was taken from the English.[2]

Against this fortified Bavarian position manned by resolute defenders an infantry offensive on the 1915 pattern stood no chance. Decades later Edmonds described the 'failure at Aubers Ridge' as having three causes: 'first, the strength of the German defences and the clever concealment of machine guns in them; secondly, the lack on the British side of sufficient shells of large calibre to deal with such defences; and thirdly, the inferior quality of much of the ammunition supplied'. Yet three days after the battle, with dead British soldiers rotting on the wire and the remains of others scattered across no-man's-land, the British public was told that 'British forces operating between Festubert and Bois Grenier' had attacked 'strongly entrenched positions [on the] Aubers ridge'. They had driven 'the enemy out of the villages of Aubers and Fromelles [and] gained a footing on the ridge'. Falsehood of this kind was common in Great War reporting. What *was* unusual was an admission a week later that described the British *failure* near Aubers as 'the black spot of the week'.

> [We] stormed the slopes of the Aubers ridge, stormed them unsuccessfully and at heavy cost because we had not sufficient high explosives at our command to destroy the strong German entrenchment on the hilltops.

> But our men who fell on the Aubers slopes did not fall [in] vain... Though the attack failed we menace La Bassée still and hold in our front a large force of the enemy. Thus we are rendering service to the French in the Lens-Arras sector.[3]

Thus the attack failed not through shortcomings in British generalship, but because the Germans had entrenched themselves (!) and there was insufficient high explosive to dislodge them! On its anniversary in 1916 and with the reign of Sir John French as British commander-in-chief a memory, a *Times* correspondent was permitted to admit that the 'results of our attacks on May 9 [1915] in the districts of Fromelles and Richebourg [were] disappointing'.

> We found the enemy much more strongly posted than we expected. We had not sufficient high explosive to level his parapets to the ground [and] when our infantry gallantly stormed the trenches... they found a garrison undismayed, many entanglements still intact, and Maxim guns on all sides ready to pour in a stream of bullets. [The] the conditions for success in an assault were not present.[4]

The correspondent drew back from allocating blame. Wartime censorship and respect for wasted British lives forbade him from asking why, with so much weighing against it, Sir John French had nevertheless decided to proceed with this attack. In doing so, while keeping faith with the French, he was ignoring 'the repeated warnings of the Intelligence Section and, indeed, the evidence that presented itself to the naked eye of any observer in the Frontline'. By early May, the German 'frontline resembled more the huge sprawling earthworks of Sevastopol than the flimsy structure that had been shattered by the [British] gunners eight weeks earlier'.[5]

Sir John was not the most able or brightest of Western Front generals. Could he have been so foolish as to believe he really had much chance of success? In any case, he plunged ahead, for in fairness he was under continuing pressure from the French to mount a follow-up offensive to Neuve Chapelle. He may also have had other motives. As a confirmed Westerner, he was bitterly opposed to the land offensive in the Dardanelles, which had just commenced. 'What's the use of killing Turks?' he argued. 'Kill Boches!!' An offensive towards the Aubers Ridge would ensure that the fighting in Flanders, and not that at Gallipoli, dominated the Front pages, so that troops and materiel might not be detoured for Churchill's Gallipoli adventure. In a sense, Sir John personally had little to lose. In the event of a successful operation he would confirm the primacy of Western Front operations and go down in history as one of Britain's great commanders. Should the offensive fail, as was likely, he could blame the politicians, who, in pursuing their own misguided Dardanelles adventure, were depriving him of men and munitions; most particularly the excellent 29th Division, which had been sent to Gallipoli.

Early 1915 was also the time of the so-called shell crisis. By now, the stockpiles of shells were close to exhaustion; those shells supplied were of unpredictable quality and even then, manufacture lagged behind consumption. A might-have-been battle, where British success had (supposedly) been squandered for the lack of shells, was grist to the mill for generals, ambitious politicians and media barons seeking to make scapegoats of a government which, it was claimed, was failing to pursue the war with enough vigour. Colonel Repington, the influential London *Times* correspondent, who had formed an alliance of convenience with Sir John against Lord Kitchener and the Asquith Government, was quick to exploit the Aubers rebuff. In his own words, Repington 'sent off to the *Times*, on May 12, without consulting anyone, a telegram which became famous, and stated, amongst other things, "that the want of an unlimited supply of high-explosive shells was a fatal blow to our success." These words were my own and not suggested by Sir John French.' Yet they had Sir John French's full backing.[6]

What can be said with certainty about this battle for the Aubers Ridge is that after the initial British euphoria the dispatches and communiqués of winner and loser told a similar story. German versions were naturally briefer. The action of 9 May 1915 involved few German units and counted for little when, at the same time, dozens of divisions were engaged against the French in Champagne and Artois, while in Galicia the Germans were the dominant partners in an offensive meant to put the Tsarist armies to rout. German comment on the Aubers battle was summed up in a communiqué issued on 10 May.

> Southwest of Lille the expected great Anglo-French attack, which we have been anticipating in reply to our success in Galicia, began. It was directed against our positions east of Fleurbaix, and east of Richebourg... White and coloured English troops, amounting to at least four fresh army corps besides the old troops which have been in the line for some time already, made repeated attacks, but were everywhere repulsed with very heavy losses... We captured some 500 prisoners.[7]

The Germans rightly surmised that the *raison d'être* behind the Aubers offensive lay in a decision taken early in 1915 at French GQG for a large-scale break-through between La Bassée and Arras. The French would attack between Souchez and Arras, while the British, supported by French artillery, would strike between La Bassée and the Lys. French artillery support failed to eventuate (another reason for Sir John to call off the attack), but a British demonstration was deemed necessary and the offensive went ahead. As the List Regiment history asserts:

> It was no secret to French GQG that great masses of German troops were demanded in the East and that because of this the strong superiority of the Franco-English armies facing the Germans on the Western Front was guaranteed. The prospects of success had never been so favourable...

> At La Bassée, the English and Indians [were] given bloody heads by the brave Westphalians. Before Fromelles they fared no better, here Bavarians held sway.[8]

The Bavarians before Fromelles were troops from the 6th BRD. For the men of the List Regiment, this was their first unqualified success of the war, even if, once more, the regiment lost heavily. Yet it not only repulsed all British attacks in its sector, but also killed almost as many men in one day as it had lost in six months prior fighting.

There were no Sevastopol-like fortifications around Fromelles when the List Regiment took up its position. Neuve Chapelle had cost the regiment 12 officers and 375 men, or 23 per cent of all its combat troops and 30 per cent of all combat officers. The mood of the survivors on 14 March was gloomy. After three nights in temporary quarters, on the night of 17 March they marched to a place 'which by its condition betrays proximity to the Front'.

> The ruins of the shelled church tower loom in the dim light of the moonlit night. Prussian subalterns await the transport and conduct [the men] into the new positions. The light of dawn removes tension and curiosity: A level field with water channels, willow trees and willow stalks, in the distance towards the enemy lines lies an insignificant wood with barbed wire entanglements. A veritable no-man's-land.[9]

All that had to be done now was to convert an inadequate defensive position into a fortress, and quickly, since a further British attack was expected as soon as the opposing forces regrouped. While sound in parts, the Fromelles position was hopeless in others. Alexander Weiss described walls of 'beautiful white sandbags, in front of which [are] strong wall-like breastworks, and behind another wall of sandbags. In between [are] protected entrances.' He found only a 'few large dug outs, which are more dwellings than fire-proof refuges'.

> But only in a few places is the position constructed so, each squad [has] a small white island, in between great gaps without wall or trench [and] scarcely a barbed wire entanglement. It is no better to the rear. There is no communication trench to protect the dispatch runners; they must carefully crawl back and forth beside a row of willows. A soldier's grave with a helmet in a muddy water-filled trench gives us something to think about... The enemy, Canadians as it happens, are mostly quiet by day but at night they spread fire – they possess more machine-guns than we – richly over our lines with the consequence that obtaining food and working on the trenches becomes extremely unpleasant.[10]

With all available hands drafted, trench lines were consolidated and the Layes brook bridged over. To the rear, the regimental bases and reserve positions were

constructed by the pioneer company, which built reinforced concrete shelters, produced prefabricated footbridges for crossing streams and drainage ditches, and laid stretches of narrow-gauge railway from the trenches near Fromelles back to the base at Fournes. 'Standing guard, filling sand bags, carrying loads, one unpleasant task follows the other with no let up', wrote Weiss. The work tempo increased over Easter (2–5 April).

> [We] are laying the groundwork for a position of such serviceability, as to offer protection and defensive possibilities for one and a half years. Very soon, in the general early year offensive in May 1915, are we able to harvest the fruits of this bitter labour. Many comrades, embittered by the work of entrenchment, learn to recognize its worth during the attack of 9 May.[11]

The division's mixed successes in First Ypres had been followed, at Christmas 1914, by a change in leadership. It was under the direction of Lieutenant General Gustav Scanzoni von Lichtenfels (who signed his name as 'Scanzoni') that the divisional position around Messines was consolidated. Scanzoni's appointment suggested that the 6th BRD was no longer to be treated as an assault division (with the relatively luxurious leave entitlements and first choice of the best reinforcements that such units enjoyed) rather – and more in keeping with its reserve division status – as a *Stellungsdivision*, or garrison division. An artillery-man and a modernist, Scanzoni was a defensive general who understood the power of artillery and machine guns, and dedicated himself to the task of ensuring that troops under his command were installed in fortifications as near impregnable as human labour and modern construction engineering could make them. This naturally endeared him to the troops under his command, as did his well-known unwillingness to waste troops in meaningless trench raids undertaken in the misguided belief that these might raise morale.[12]

The contrast between the realistic, defensively minded Scanzoni – a man who enjoyed the nickname of *Der Stellungsgeneral* – and many of his British (or French) opposite numbers is palpable. Even so, it remains a mystery why the British did little to impede his work-in-progress on a position they were planning to attack. They were also labouring, but where Scanzoni ensured that his men dug in for a long war, the British made less substantial arrangements, befitting an army committed to attack and the belief that its trenches would not be needed for long. The words 'digging' and 'trenches' need elaboration. In Flanders with its high water table, sandbag breastworks and steel decking were augmented, on the German side, by dugouts excavated beneath the topsoil into the underlying sandstone, as well as carefully sited reinforced-concrete bunkers, block houses and observation posts. This work was exhausting but not very dangerous: in the two months following Neuve Chapelle, the List Regiment lost 49 men killed compared with 1,062 in the first four and a half months of the war. This would be remembered as a 'peaceful time'. Cheers could be heard from Tommy; 'he sings, whistles and plays the

mouth organ, in good German he calls out: "Jerry, do you still have bread? Do you want some cigarettes? Do you have any beer? Do you want to sing us a song?"' 'What chivalrous foes these Englishmen were'. Solleder recalled 'a newspaper cutting found on a captured prisoner, which reported on the solemn burial of a simple comrade, who had died on 25 March in captivity [at Plymouth]'.[13]

Face to face in no-man's-land, the same men who traded pleasantries from the security of their trenches would have had no hesitation in trading bullets or smashing in each other's skulls. Once breastworks were established and nests created, snipers took no mercy on any man foolish enough to raise his head above the parapet, while a dispatch runner sighted crawling along a shallow communication trench was fair game. At night the Germans stationed 'small troops of up to 10 men in front of the trenches in look-out posts', so as to 'intercept the more daring patrols. Watch dogs bark across the breastworks at the look-out parties lying in wait [and] in between times the bright laughter of French women can be heard from English trenches.' No such sounds were heard from German trenches. But 45 French mothers and children were 'evacuated from Fournes on 21 April for Switzerland'. In 'heart rending scenes', they took their 'farewell from abbot and mayor, from home and hearth'. Heart-rending yes, but the evacuees – or more correctly deportees – were villagers netted in a round-up of civilians from the Lille-Roubaix, Tourcoing conurbation and destined not to find refuge in Switzerland but to work for the Germans in the fields on the Aisne and Ardennes. In the words of Larry Zuckerman, 'Most of the deportees were women, girls and teenage boys because so few able-bodied men were left.'[14]

The Bavarians who entered Fournes on 17 March 1915 had no idea that they 'would be staying in this village longer than a year'. The township was scarcely damaged. 'The better-class families had fled in October 1914' and only the mayor – a brewer who learnt his craft in Germany and spoke 'very good German' – and some working-class families remained. The regimental commander and staff were quartered in a boarding school, private houses, halls and large rooms. From the *Place du Pavillon* in the village centre, a path led directly to the trenches at Fromelles, which itself was in ruins; 'the market place was nothing more than a heap of rubble, only the crucifix in the town centre remained unharmed'. Bavarians took this for divine intervention, the cross being used as 'protection' by sentries. Fromelles had already 'claimed enough victims, as shown by the many wooden crosses in the newly laid-out soldiers' cemetery. Henceforth it would be our fate and honour to increase these.' The laughter and joking of the men 'was for the most part gallows humour, by which we sought to take our mind off the uncertainty of waiting'.[15]

Telephone lines between Fournes, Fromelles village and the trenches had not yet been laid, and the dispatch runners were kept busy in the two months between battles. On 18 March 1915, Hitler set off with his first and always most dangerous dispatch. Only experience would reveal hot spots where a sniper might get in a clear shot or a machine-gunner might traverse exposed ground.

Hitler, according to Mend, was unconcerned when the dispatch rider warned him: 'you're a mole. You'll come through all right, just don't let them shoot you in the guts.' 'That's my business, my dear Mend', Hitler replied. Fate, Providence, Destiny or plain good luck, he needed all of them. Even then, he needed to keep his head down.

> [The] communication trenches leading to the positions furthest forward provided little protection; they were not deep enough and already, on the first crossings, caused many casualties. Adolf Hitler had to take these dangerous paths several times daily and, if he wanted to come through safe and sound, was obliged to crawl more so than march. Not even the slightest movement escaped English snipers.[16]

With the arrival of warmer weather and March winds, the sodden land at Fromelles began to dry. Early in April, the men were told to expect an attack. Enemy artillery activity was increasing, with the railway station at Fournes, in particular, coming under fire towards evening. 'At first the civilians were scarcely concerned [but] in the middle of April when a direct-hit killed a family civilians [were] brought further back from the Front.' At the end of April, the regiment went into rest. Dispatch runners now had little to do. Hitler spent much of his time pontificating 'on his favourite topics, art and painting'. Officers like Wiedemann were patronizing about Hitler's homespun *Bayrisch* monologues but among his peers, while some thought him a 'know-all', most 'listened to him gladly... amazed how well informed he was'.

> He could speak like a professor about German art history. Later we began to talk about our fighting sector... He only had opponents when he spoke about his [other] favourite theme, politics. Already in 1915, comrades in his immediate circle did not yet share his views on State and National Socialism. I [Mend] was pleased to listen to him, although then as now [1931] politics were of little interest to me.[17]

On 2 May 1915, Mend and Hitler were in the courtyard by the regimental post at Fromelles awaiting orders. Shells were flying 'unceasingly' overhead. In the ruined marketplace, a sentry was huddled beside the crucifix, trusting in the 'magic claim that nothing would happen to him'. Suddenly a shell landed plumb in the middle of the court.

> For the moment, we were dumb with fright. Beside me, Wimmer stood deathly white and from the cellar vault, which served as a dugout for the staff, Colonel Petz burst out with the adjutant, demanding to know where it had hit. [We] were not capable of answering [but] Hitler, brushing dirt from his trousers, turned to reply with great composure, as if this incessant shelling was not happening.[18]

First-aid men and orderlies crammed into Petz's dugout. Someone asked, 'where's Adolf?' and was told that he had 'gone looking around Fromelles for better boots'. Another suggested if Hitler found a Dixie full of sweet tea nothing could bring him back until the next morning. While Hitler searched for boots, shells poured into Fromelles. Finally, Petz sent Mend to Fournes with a dispatch. On the way he encountered Hitler, who 'actually had a pair of boots in his hands and had a calmness about him as if he'd just brought them from a fair'.[19]

This shellfire marked the opening of the preliminary bombardment to the Battle of Aubers Ridge. Puny compared with the artillery preludes of later years (or Neuve Chapelle), it did little more than provide defenders with an ample warning: a week later the British found the Germans ready and prepared for an attack which was supposed to be a 'surprise'. How obvious this pending attack had become is clear from the regimental diary.

> May begins restlessly. The dream of the peaceful position is dispelled...
>
> 2 and 3 May. 28 cm (railway guns) fire on our base at the estaminet 'Rouges Bancs' and on the command position 'Bavaria'.
>
> 4 May. The thunder of cannons rolls on unceasingly to the right of us...
>
> 5 May. The English artillery pounds the first line and hinterland so heavily that trench walls collapse...
>
> 6 and 7 May. The sound of the artillery takes on a deeper note...
>
> 8 May. The English artillery shakes and hammers the whole territory... All dispatches advise that the English have systematically zeroed in on approach paths, cross roads and quarters.
>
> By evening, the impression exists in the division that an attack is imminent. This impression is reported to OHL.[20]

Early in the morning of Sunday, 9 May 1915, the battle began. Most of the staff at regimental headquarters was asleep, but Mend, up early, rode past 'a few civilians going to Mass'. Suddenly, above, he heard a 'muffled discharge, howling like a railway train racing through the air'. A heavy calibre shell plunged into the schoolhouse where Mend had been moments before.

> Nothing more could be seen, frightful screams and cries for help could be heard from neighbouring houses still inhabited by civilians. When the sulphurous fumes dispersed, I saw civilians dressed only in shirts, women with children in their arms wandering around the street. The schoolhouse had been smashed and the ruins scattered widely. The bodies of our comrades quartered there had been torn to pieces and made a ghastly sight.[21]

With this 'first direct hit [the] frightful battle of 9 May' began. Moments later a powerful explosion came from the trenches. An angry artillery duel then began,

and 'a heavy shell struck the regimental staff building. I considered them all lost, they had been in the deepest sleep only a few minutes before.' Mend climbed a nearby tree and 'looked out over our trench sector, but any orientation was impossible. The whole area was wrapped in smoke, only the fire cones of shells and the flashes of exploding shrapnel could be made out.' As he rode back to rejoin the staff, Mend found Hitler 'with the other dispatch runners and medical orderlies by the badly damaged staff building'. Here he was told 'that the English had burst out and straight away had penetrated our position'. Petz was receiving reports of heavy casualties and ordered the dispatch runners standing in the Place du Pavillon to march off 'at intervals in pairs, to avoid greater losses'. When Mend reached Fromelles, he was unable to quarter his horse in 'the usual stall, as this was being used by medical orderlies'.

> As I pulled the door of the stall open, the injured cried to me: Water please! [English in the original]. A white Englishman, who could no longer stand the constant cries of pain of his neighbour, struck a coloured man who was wailing the worst, in the face. I dragged the badly wounded Indian to the other corner of the stall and brought him water.[22]

Meanwhile Hitler had delivered several dispatches, 'exposed to the heavy barrage on the way from Fromelles to the fighting zone'. He reported that the English and Bavarians were 'now engaged in close-combat fighting'. 'Every shell-hole is being bitterly contested. Because of our barrage, the English have been cut off from all possible help. Many are hanging on the electrified barbed wire and screaming horribly.'

> As we knew him to be a man who never exaggerated and who expressed himself carefully in such situations, we knew now a bloody fight was being waged. His expression also attracted attention. He must have seen much horror and have joined in the fighting himself; the expression of the eyes in his thin yellow face told us as much.[23]

Hitler, if he did involve himself in the fighting, was overstepping his duties. Brandmayer was not a man to do more than was asked or expected of him. Having recuperated from his wounds at Neuve Chapelle, he rejoined his platoon at Easter 1915, in perfect timing for the hard labour of the following month. Fromelles was 'desolate, soggy and undermined through mud. Between the "Schützenhaus" (safe house) and the "Deleval" farm the regiment stretched in breadth. Now our fun begins. The position has to be made secure against bombs with sandbags. The dugouts roofed-in with wooden beams and the trenches fortified with mighty breastworks.' At the beginning of May the enemy 'became livelier. Our sector was subjected to heavy artillery and mortar fire at regular intervals.' It was now clear that was 'something afoot' and on the evening of 8 May, the Bavarians watched 'a grandiose display of flares' which lasted 'a whole

hour'. 'Otherwise a sinister silence reigns over the battlefield. We all feel that the enemy intends something important.' Next morning the men woke to the sounds of 'distant explosions!' The British 'have wreaked havoc in Fournes'.

> English muzzles flame in the early morning light, a never experienced barrage from a thousand guns rises, and drives us into the deepest corner of the dugout. The earth no longer offers protection. I stare lost in the dark of the dugout. With all limbs trembling, I groan in despair, then consciousness fades ——. I don't know any more.[24]

When he opened his eyes the dugout had caved in.
'Wounded cry, weeping softly. And above us a storm of iron. I reach for the pocket of my tunic and find the rosary. I want to pray, the prayer for the dead... I finger the wooden pearls, as though my life depends on them. In a fit of madness, I hurl them away from me, anywhere... despairing in God and faith.'[25]

Now the German artillery began to reply, pouring out 'from all throats its destructive iron. The enemy cannonade [has] cut off all communication between the reserves and the command post.' With telephone connections destroyed, 'dispatch runners move laboriously along the way to the Front'. At seven o'clock 'a mighty shattering [sends] masses of earth and human parts whirl hissing in the air. Ringing cries for help – the unfortunates choke and fall silent for eternity.' A stinking cloud of yellow smoke, moving slowly over the field of the dead, signals the British attack. Wave after wave of attackers crawl 'over the breast-works and in spite of our terrible fire push through the growing gaps'. However, German artillery fire had cut the British off. 'Flanking fire and hand grenades make their stay intolerable.'

> Towards midday, we advance in a counter-attack, and stubbornly, metre after metre is retrieved from him. All lost territory reverts finally to our possession. With night falling, we are relieved...
>
> Fournes, until a few months ago still a town of a few thousand inhabitants lies in rubble and ashes. The dreadful experience of the last few days has broken me. Apathetically and lost to the world I ponder my fate. I have narrowly avoided death and still cannot believe that I am alive.[26]

Adolf Meyer's experience was as harsh as Brandmayer's. His 10th company was almost annihilated, most of the men falling victim to British mines buried in deep saps beneath the German trenches. His company had already lost heavily at Neuve Chapelle and just three days before the 9 May battle had been reinforced with the arrival of 72 *Landsturm* men, aged between 17 and 20 and possessing a bare minimum of military training. So urgent was the need that they arrived without identification tags or pay books. Most of these youngsters

would perish in the fighting of 9 May 1915. Meyer's IIIrd battalion had moved into the furthest forward position of the German frontline on the evening of 8 May.

> The night facing the enemy, who is approximately 70 metres away, passes quietly. At the stroke of 5 a.m. all hell breaks loose. English cannons and mortars throw death and destruction at us. Our own divisional artillery remains silent. They cannot allow the enemy to know that they only have 12 guns. Some of their guns had been sent on 7 May to a position near La Bassée, because something 'big' had been expected there for days.[27]

Something 'big' was also about to happen at Fromelles. Suddenly there was a violent impact 100 metres from where Meyer crouched; the 'post to our right, some 12 to 15 metres away, is hurled vertically into the air. We assume the impact of a direct hit, however the extraordinarily strong earth-tremors make us immediately suspicious, even more so since the earth continues to rain down and we are enveloped in a dense cloud of smoke.'

> The infernal noise grows silent at an instant. The smoke lies conspicuously for minutes on the ground. When it finally lifts, what a horrible spectacle! Some 200 Englishmen have got into our trenches and formed regulation columns which immediately begin the advance on Fromelles... The puzzle as to how this could have happened, is soon solved... [The] English have set a mine, awaited the moment of the explosion and then penetrated our position under the protection of the growing smoke cloud. The mine crater offers the enemy serviceable cover, and especially the possibility of driving still further into our lines.[28]

The men remaining in Meyer's company now sought to make their trench secure. 'Sandbag after sandbag goes from hand to hand and in a short time we have some measure of protection again.' The attacking British troops peppered them with hand grenades. 'Unfortunately we can't answer with the same weapon, for our sparse stocks have been buried under the preceding artillery fire.' The neighbouring 9th company was also trying to deal with invading British troops.

> To the right and to the left in the trenches, in front of us and behind us the English! Our only job now consists of shooting down Englishmen running from the old English lines to the mine crater. It is shocking for us, a small surviving handful of 66 men, to know [that] that every connection to the rear, as well as to the right and left has been cut off. Luckily, the enemy does not realize how weak we are. Terrible hours follow.[29]

Cut off and abandoned, the men now believed they could not possibly survive. About 10 in the evening, however, 'a counter-attack by the reserves of the 2nd and the assembled 1st battalions' was successful. The rescuers were surprised to find a small band of troops still fighting in the trenches. 'Our saviours had long believed us to be dead.'

> The 9th of May, the worst day for the 10th company of the 16th Reserve Infantry Regiment is over. A black day for our company. Eighty-nine are dead, 15 wounded and three taken prisoner. The sad glory of having been the victims of the first enemy mine explosion of the world war has almost wiped our company out of existence.[30]

If it was any recompense, 'enemy losses have been worse still. The 13th London Regiment, student volunteers, have been destroyed during their assault.' All across the Bavarian lines, the British had been thrown back. With both sides exhausted, a brief truce was arranged while fatigued troops went about 'the sad duty of collecting the remains of our fallen comrades'. The morning of 10 May was peaceful. 'Most of our comrades were buried alive under metres of earth. We find about 40. The others, who could not be recovered, we leave at rest in their first grave. We lie the dead in an open place behind our trenches, one beside the other.'

> We have never seen so many dead in so little space. They had all left their rest quarters at Deprez fit and well on the evening of 8 May, had fulfilled their duties in the hours of night before the morning of 9 May, and had survived the peaceful hours of the early morning on this Sunday. Some may have thought of their far distant home or loved-one. No one could have envisaged that in a few moments he would be cut down in the rich harvest of Death.[31]

That morning before the truce, Mend rode openly into Fromelles. Apart from sporadically exploding shells, 'everything was quiet'. A sentry stood 'in front of the still undisturbed crucifix'. Men returning from the trenches spoke of 'the frightful events we'd already heard of from Hitler... It must have been a terrible battle, the ground was covered with corpses.'

> Wounded Englishmen lay in rows in the courtyard and in the stall. Most wanted to drink and our medical orderly constantly served water and cold tea... A few lay in their death throes. Others, who had been freed from their pain by injection, offered proof by their thankful expressions that they now knew we were not barbarians as their side had taught them. Again and again, I heard: 'Thank you, comrade'. I turned over a long-legged highlander, who was wounded in the chest and lay him flat on the ground so that he could breathe better. He

> immediately grabbed me with his left hand and wanted me to have his gold ring.[32]

Towards midday Mend left Fromelles with the staff doctor. He was told that 'during the fierce fighting, [Hitler] had delivered his messages under heavy machine-gun and artillery fire and by repeatedly risking his life had contributed greatly to the victory'. Brandmayer's battalion was pulled out of the line, but their respite lasted only two days. So great had been the losses that neither side was able, in the time available, to bring in all their dead or wounded. 'The silence of the grave' hovered over land, 'churned and torn up by English shells. A single field of corpses. Hundreds of dead lie beyond, some already four days old. Friend and foe slumber peacefully beside one another, their blood congealing together in the French spring earth.'

> And the horror. The death rattles of the gravely wounded can still be heard among decomposing bodies. With superhuman strength, they wrestle for their life against the strangulation of death. We hoist a white flag, the enemy replies – we want to clear the dead from the battlefield. We wait and wait . . . hours pass –. In vain, the enemy will not negotiate. Instead, he immerses the whole field in a sea of deadly fire . . . breaking afresh the already mutilated earth. Finally, the guns fall silent. The dead have been scattered about in thousands of pieces and the next day the sun burns mercilessly upon decomposing bodies. We can barely breathe for the stink. With chemicals, we fight the poisoned air.[33]

British reports of the battle make no mention of this. Nonetheless, the portrayals of the battle provided by Meyer, Brandmayer and Mend accord, in most respects, with the overviews offered in German histories. The Bavarian official history, for example, reveals that the British opening barrage commenced at dawn. 'At about 5 o'clock in the morning the first shell flew towards Fournes, at the same time the Front came under light enemy artillery fire, that suddenly at 5:45 was turned into a barrage.' Meyer, in the trenches, saw few signs of German artillery activity, but the regimental history claims that *before* the British mine explosions, German artillery had already responded. Since 'all lines to the Front and the rear, despite being triplicated, were shot out of action', the order for the German batteries to commence firing was communicated by dispatch runners, and for 'almost two hours, our reserve field-artillery maintained rapid fire'. At seven o'clock, the air shook from a powerful detonation. British land mines caused a wide breach in the Bavarian line and blew 'six groups from our brave garrison from the face of the earth'.

> Thick black-gold smoke lay between the two sets of lines, which obstructed any view. Under this protection, dense enemy columns broke

> out on a frontal breadth of some 30 metres into the breach made by the mines, whereupon they [were] subjected to violent fire from a machine gun as soon as the Front came within 30 metres of our trenches. In spite of this, the English, storming bravely forward in dense masses and uncaring of all losses, plainly succeeded in breaking through our main position... The English barrage increased.[34]

The Bavarian left wing was 'destroyed [by] heavy artillery fire of all calibres' and trenches were evacuated. However, the British had worked themselves into a trap. To the east their progress was blocked by the debris of battle, which 'formed an impenetrable wall, behind which men were cut off', while to the west, reinforcements in water-filled craters before the German lines had to pull back. 'They were under fire the whole day and suffered heavy losses. An English machine-gun, which had been brought to within fifty metres of our trench, was shut down.'

> The enemy who had penetrated here was systematically driven back in close-combat fighting and annihilated, those who sought to retreat over the breastworks were shot down by our growing number of men...
>
> Now the enemy sought to withdraw, but... there was no escape. Those who chose not to surrender, were mercilessly slaughtered with hand grenades and rifle butts.[35]

The official regimental account ends on this grim note. Rupprecht provided this postscript on the first anniversary of the battle, in 1916.

> On today's first anniversary of the great spring battle of 1915, I commemorate in grateful memory and warm recollection the excellent conduct of the 6th BRD. Their stubborn fight against superior English force forms the most shining performance of this heavy day.
>
> The proud report of this day, that all positions were recaptured, the invading opponents annihilated or made prisoner, remains in lasting and uplifting memory.[36]

While the British official history devotes 43 pages to the 'failure' of Aubers Ridge, as Edmonds points out, 'Little is said about the British attack in German histories; they recognize that it was undertaken to assist the main, the French attack.' Indeed the part played by the 6th BRD and its regiments is compressed, in both Bavarian and Reich official histories, to about a paragraph. In the Reichsarchiv account, the offensive began with a desultory artillery barrage, after which

> they advanced step by step at about 6 a.m. against the sector of the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division and against the centre of the VII

Army Corps. To the north of Fromelles, elements of the English IV Corps succeeded in breaking into the position of the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division. The bitter hand to hand combat gradually eased. Towards evening the surrounded Englishmen were either wiped out or captured.[37]

8

NURSERY TALES OF 1915

Brandmayer returned to the regiment on 30 May 1915. Assigned to the orderlies, he handed in his rifle and collected a dispatch runner's kit of 'an army pistol, a dispatch case and a flashlight'. His new quarters were more comfortable than the trenches and his comrades greeted him with 'the loudest hullo, for they were happy to have a newcomer to initiate'. This initiation apparently included advice on how to deal with officers, particularly those who needed to be treated with caution. Lieutenant Eichelsdörfer, the regimental adjutant, seemed to be greatly admired but Eichelsdörfer's deputy, Hugo Gutmann – 'an officer of Jewish appearance and manners' – was regarded as 'panic-prone [and] unpopular'. Minutes later, Hitler 'stepped into the shelter'.

> He had come back fatigued after a delivery. I looked at him for the first time in my life. We stood eye to eye facing one another... He was like a skeleton, his face pale and colourless. Two piercingly dark eyes, which struck me especially, stared out of deep sockets. His prominent moustache was unkempt. Forehead and facial expression suggested high intelligence. I can still see him today as he stood before me then, loosening his belt buckle. Along with Mund Max, Adolf Hitler became my inseparable comrade.[1]

That night, accompanied by an experienced runner, Brandmayer delivered his first dispatch, an order to the pioneer company. 'The path offered little protection from artillery fire and one was not even covered against machine-gun activity.' On the way back they brought tea and sausage sandwiches for the 'hungry bellies'. But Hitler ignored them, as he sat huddled 'in a corner with his head buried in a newspaper, sipping from time to time from a field kettle filled with hot tea'. After his first day as a dispatch runner, Brandmayer bedded down in a straw-covered wooden trellis. 'Sleep overcame us and took us softly into its arms.'

> After a few days, I got to know all of the dispatch runners. Their names were Schmied [Schmidt], a pleasant Franconian, Weiss Jackl, a publican's

> son from the Hallertau, Mund Max, an unflappable Municher, Sperl, Tiefenback, Landshammer, Inkofer and Bachmann. The billet [in Fournes] was an old, dilapidated house, in which lived an old French woman, we called her 'Black Mary', who never wanted to leave her so-called apartment, even during the fighting.[2]

Fresh and aggressive troops now faced the Bavarians. From the positions occupied by the 8th English and 51st Highland divisions, a constant stream of ineffective automatic weapons fire now issued, accompanied by sporadic shelling. When these units pulled out, they were replaced by Canadians as well as units formed out of the 'black subordinate races' of the British Empire. Enemy morale was high. 'The sounds of pipes and singing penetrated from the enemy trenches', but high morale was no substitute for experience: men peering over the breastworks offered 'a good target for our sharpshooters'. On both sides losses were consistent. Even if those of the Bavarians were slight compared with what had gone before, they were constant enough for the regimental doctor to note: 'Almost daily the regiment loses one or more dead and several wounded.' The Tommies were doing more than singing and playing pipes. 'They tunnel under the breastworks, lie in hollows and, concealed by high grass, push their saps out, carefully bringing back to their lines sandbags filled with the freshly dug earth.' By now a joint Allied offensive between La Bassée and Arras was regarded as imminent. In the expectation that this would spill over and affect Fromelles, regimental pioneers began the construction of 'reinforced-concrete positions on the regimental flanks'. But the British were strengthening their position too: 'Tommy deepens his trenches, in order to be better protected... he does not shoot any more from on top of the breastworks, but through slits.' The British wire was now 'up to 20 metres deep [with] his shelters and dugouts 30 to 40 metres further back'. Many sections of British trench were decked by 'fortified plate-steel, presumably to make sentry posts, machine-gun nests and artillery observation posts safer'.[3]

Although a gas attack was expected, it was not used by the British at the inset of this attack, which was launched shortly before four on the morning of 30 June. This was again preceded by the explosion of a mine, which caused 'a powerful fountain of earth. The ground shook [and] black-brown columns of earth poured high into the air.' The first British soldiers had already left their trenches but the Bavarians facing them, under Scanzoni at division and another renowned 'trench general' Christoph von Kiefhaber at brigade, were now a first-class defensive unit operating out of a near-impregnable position. Once more the British took heavy losses for no gain and the offensive soon petered out. In the ensuing months neither side launched more than the odd trench raid. Live-and-let-live reigned, marked by good-natured banter. On 28 July, a Bavarian patrol left notices with 'Greetings from Munich' on the British wire. The British responded: 'are you the Bavarians from Messines? Are you going home soon?'[4]

The sector held by the 6th BRD was beginning to become so peaceful that both sides began treating it as a nursery sector; a part of the line where freshly formed units with a high complement of raw troops might be initiated, gently, into Western Front realities, or where battered divisions, recently pulled out of battle, might benefit from a stay in a less arduous sector of the line. On the flanks of the 6th BRD were divisions fresh from the Eastern Front and against them were dominion or New Army divisions, being introduced to the Western Front. Nothing better highlights nursery-sector existence than the List Regiment's casualty rate. In the year between 1 July 1915 and 30 June 1916, 358 men were killed, only eight more than was experienced in one day at Becalaere in October 1914. Forty-seven of these were lost in two-weeks fighting in September–October 1915, when the regimental combat strength was split between Fromelles and La Bassée, where Hugo Gutmann won an Iron Cross First Class. Most Listers, particularly the old hands, would look back on those 12 months with nostalgia. In this period the many new faces among the men of a regiment – that had lost, dead, wounded or captured, almost all those who left Germany in October 1914 – could form bonds of comradeship.[5]

By now, Hitler and the few remaining original Listers had been in action since October 1914. Replacements seemed to be delighted with live-and-let-live, and it was galling to the fanatical Hitler to discover that they shared little of the ardour of the men of 1914. Barely 12 months into the war, Brandmayer was not alone in thinking 'in all probability that we could not win'. Hitler would hear none of this: 'For us the world war cannot be lost', he insisted. Some shared his opinion, but 'a few murmured: "Our Adolf can't possibly know that." Often he was contradicted out of defiance, which merely made Hitler even more excited.' Many comrades, Brandmayer among them, remained unconvinced.

> While the will for complete victory is still strong [a] soft yearning for a quick peace creeps unconsciously into our hearts. Who would have believed at that time, that we had not as yet fought through a quarter of this disastrous world war?... The war grew by unspeakable cruelty and degenerated in the next two years into a monstrous battle of matériel.[6]

While the infantry on both sides now sat, snug and relatively safe behind deep breastworks or in reinforced-concrete or steel-clad shelters, dispatch runners still had occasional messages to carry, across open ground in daylight or through trenches that left them exposed in places to enemy snipers. At the end of August, Hitler was sniped at by two 'dedicated English observers' and exposed to shrapnel. On his return to his post at Fromelles, he was handed another dispatch. Mend warned him to be careful, but 'without bothering to reply he left for the Front'. Avoiding hot spots and sniper fire on his way to the trenches was by now routine. 'When he was not fired at, he would often say on his return: "Today an old women would have had no trouble in getting through."' On returning from a particularly hazardous mission:

> Hitler often looked completely exhausted; the best nerves can fail. However, he always pulled himself together... I never saw him receive a field packet. Nor would he accept presents from us, though we often made the offer. Occasionally he refused with a brief thank you [and] was uninterested in home leave. The trenches and Fromelles were his world and what lay beyond did not exist for him.[7]

Mend recalled him sitting 'in a corner [in] deep contemplation, his head between his hands'. Suddenly he jumped up, crying out that if victory were denied to Germany, then 'the invisible enemies of the German people would be more dangerous than the mightiest enemy guns'. At slack times, in the hours when their services were not required, the orderlies took the opportunity to relax. When Hitler was present, however, 'the conversation developed promptly in a highly-political manner'. Many an 'obstinate Marxist found himself Hitler's inferior in argument'.

> By the logic of his reasoning, which he often clothed in witty form, even the most dogged opponent came to agree with him. These were far preferable to such lukewarm and mindless comrades as, for example, a telephone operator, who told him before the great autumn battle that he couldn't care less whether Germany won the war or lost. Hitler was so enraged that if we had not have held him back the telephonist would have been taken to hospital with a bloody head.[8]

At this time, while always on call, the dispatch runners led a relatively relaxed existence, relaxed enough in Hitler's case for him to sketch, catch up on his newspaper reading and, presumably, continue his study of propaganda techniques. For this autodidact, there was no shortage of material to hand, since the first half of 1915 marked the consolidation of propaganda campaigns on both sides. As far as war's overview and *raison d'être* were concerned, what Hitler and his fellow dispatch runners could read in May 1915 differed little from what they would be reading in 1918. This was inevitable, since the artful propagandist already knew the value of constant reiteration; while ensuring that there was just enough variety in the detail to hold the regular reader's attention. On both sides the most effective propagandists were already employing styles that eschewed argument and reason in favour of repetition and moral outrage. While the British usually wrote the most effective and creatively mendacious war propaganda, no single journalist was more loathed by the Germans than Maurice Barrès. An anti-republican advocate of what his biographer describes as a political creed akin to National Socialism, Barrès, an erstwhile literary lion of the *belle époque*, was hated almost as much by the French left as by the Germans: Romain Rolland called him a 'nightingale of carnage'. Like a nightingale, Barrès had a bare handful of themes, recycling them with subtle variations after appropriate intervals so that the attention of his audience never flagged. Single-handedly, he is credited

with raising the circulation of the *Echo de Paris* to an imposing (for Paris) half million by the armistice.[9]

A dedicated newspaper reader like Hitler could not have been unaware of Barrès; excerpts from his articles were regularly translated and reprinted in the German press, and cited as shocking examples of the depths of mendacity to which the French had sunk. Barrès was not the only journalist to be so 'honoured'. In this propaganda war, claims appearing in the enemy press that differed from one's own were routinely reprinted as examples of enemy lies; French papers even inserted daily quotes from the German press under front-page headings like *Leurs mensonges* (their lies). Neither side could claim the moral high ground. Shortly after Neuve Chapelle, when the *Berliner Tageblatt* described Paris newspapers as having 'daily for the last nine months written the same thing', the pot was surely calling the kettle black.

> Paris newspapers since the outbreak of the war have really become forbiddingly boring. Day by day the same endless tirades about the origins of the great 'victoire' that never comes, about the wickedness [and] cowardice of the 'barbarians' or 'Boches'... about their constant flight and finally their pitiable famine, about the victory march of the Russians on Berlin, the 'definitive' end of Turkey, the 'immediately imminent' intervention, after many long months, of most neutral states, the 'complete annihilation' of the Austro-Hungarian army and other no less crazy rubbish.[10]

While the Germans were only too eager to attack the French media and France's leaders, they drew back from criticizing the French people, maintaining or pretending to maintain bewilderment as to why French citizens who lived outside those *départements* under German occupation hated them. According to German publicity, none of this hatred was ever reciprocated. Ludwig Haas, a Reichstag politician, claimed on 17 March 1915 that the 'German people knows no hatred of [the] French.' He cited friendly relations between 'troops in the occupied parts of France with the population' as proof that the German soldier was the representative of a cultured race, 'educated in good German schools he declines to make the individual Frenchman responsible for law-breaking French judges [or] for the artificially inflamed excesses of the French mob'. With the English, it was quite different: 'We stand today as we did when we came for the first time into battle, in a fight against the English', against whom all Germans were 'passionately opposed'. Yet since hate was alien to a cultured people, it was 'With pride the whole of Germany knows [that] its press has kept calm and written no inflammatory article, and that we remain free from hatred against unarmed citizens.'

> France wages this war because influential circles were deluded by their hatred and because the people could not find the courage to protest

> against the politics of hate; world history however, will decide whether this politics of hate was good or bad for France... We expect a period of German world politics after this war. National tolerance however, goes hand in hand with world politics.[11]

Unable to counter Allied atrocity propaganda, the Germans argued that Allied accusations were the misguided and scurrilous actions of a desperate enemy, and that a victorious Germany would soon enough have its day in court. By this time, soldiers were greeting the wildest Allied accusations with amusement. '[We] only laughed in those days', Hitler later stated. Material was read, then 'for the most part forgotten'.[12]

Experienced soldiers could read communiqués and dispatches for the tosh they often were. But what was a soldier to believe? For the big picture, he had little choice but to accept what appeared in the press. In May 1915, officially the Germans still pretended – as indeed they would for the rest of the war – that the 'so-called "Battle on the Marne" [was] only subsequently discovered [as a] great French victory'. The Germans averred that no one had won a relatively minor battle that they insisted on treating with ridicule.

> An imaginative Paris weekly journal has put together a whole list of people to whom France owes thanks for this victory... three ministers, five divisional generals, two brigadier generals, three senators, two parliamentary deputies, one state-subsidized theatre director, an aeroplane pilot, four newspaper proprietors, one director of an automobile manufacturing firm. Each of these confirms that without him it would never have been possible to win the famous rescue-battle.[13]

Acknowledgement that there had been a battle on the Marne and that it *might* have been indecisive was an improvement, of sorts, from the silence of September 1914. Nevertheless, for Germans prepared to think critically, this silence must have left an odd gap in their history of the war. One moment their troops were about to enter Paris, the next, with Paris still unconquered, they were fighting for positions well to the north of the French capital.

In the List Regiment there were few qualified to dispute the word of the military experts sanctioned to peddle opinion in the German press. In detail he was often critical, but as far as the big picture was concerned, Adolf Hitler seems to have been the truest of true believers in what was claimed in the press. In the weeks following Neuve Chapelle, these experts continued to tell how 'British military dreamers' had now been forced to 'come down to earth', alluded to problems in the *Entente*, and prophesied the imminent disintegration of the British Empire. Most of their contempt was directed at the 'wretched' BEF. Citing the February 1915 edition of the 'Yearbooks for the German Army and navy' (*Jahrbüchern für die deutsche Armee und Marine*) – which he regarded as 'irreproachable' – the *Berliner Tageblatt*'s

resident expert went on to describe the pathetic state of Britain's volunteer army.

> [The] practice of nominating NCOs and officers is 'absolutely unscrupulous'. Officers, 'who are hardly able to handle a weapon and have had no military schooling', who are occupied with the task of 'moulding raw soldier-material into usable field warriors in the shortest period of time', pose nothing to fear for the German Army. 'From British reports desertions have reached the point that sometimes up to 1,000 men have sought to escape'.[14]

Some of the most reprehensible propaganda coincided when the war was not going well, when recruitment was falling away or morale tumbling. The British defeat on Aubers Ridge coincided with the story of the crucified Canadian and the release of the official report on German atrocities by Lord Bryce, now mostly discredited. Phillip Knightley, writing in 1975, pointed out that Bryce's Committee depended on unreliable hearsay and did not even bother to interview 'a single witness'. Instead, their report was 'based on 1,200 depositions, mostly from Belgian refugees, taken by twenty-two barristers in England. None of the witnesses were placed on oath, their names were omitted [and] hearsay evidence was accepted at face value.' When researchers sought to examine these depositions at the Home Office, 'they had mysteriously disappeared, and no trace of them has been found to this day'. In 1923 Philip Gibbs wrote:

> Doubtless, there had been many atrocities, but I could never get evidence of any of them. All the evidence I could get myself [was] against the truth of them. No living babies had their hands cut off, or women their breasts. No Canadians were crucified, though it will be believed in Canada for all time. The evidence was analyzed and rejected by our General Headquarters.[15]

Gibbs was not on his own. After the war Arthur Ponsonby, with Lloyd George, 'carried on extensive investigations as to the truth of these horrible accusations... Every case investigated proved to be a myth.' Similarly the *Times* correspondent, Colonel Repington, noted that the Pope 'promised to make a great protest to the world if a single case could be proved of the violation of Belgian nuns or cutting off of children's hands. An inquiry was instituted and many cases examined with the help of the Belgian Cardinal Merceier. Not one case could be proved.'[16]

This was doubtless so, but the sheer absurdity of Allied hate propaganda (to which category, the Bryce Report deserves to belong) blunted subsequent perceptions of how badly the Germans actually behaved in occupied Belgium following their invasion of 1914. The Bryce Report actually 'reinforced the impression that the invasion defined German crimes', writes Zuckerman,

'which underlined the relative absence of the occupation in the debate on Belgium'.

> Why the British, let alone the Belgians, made so little of the occupation is puzzling, especially when the Germans gave them fresh ammunition every week. In part, this was because no one outside Belgium could appreciate what was happening, and to do so would have required a frame of reference that they lacked. A later generation that had witnessed full-blown totalitarian regimes would have understood, but in 1914 and 1915, the occupation was hard to comprehend or credit, never mind explain.[17]

Perhaps the single most sensationalist (and arguably effective) piece of mendacious First World War propaganda, the tale of the crucified Canadian, first appeared in the London *Times*. By 1915 this once proud journal-of-record was enjoying with the *Daily Mail*, its downmarket stable-mate, the reputation among Germans of being the most irresponsible of all British *Käseblätte* (cheese wrappers). Bylined 'From Our Special Correspondent', the story first appeared on 15 May 1915, approximately a week after the Aubers debacle and the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

> The unfortunate victim was a sergeant... found transfixed to the wooden fence of a farm building. Bayonets were thrust, through the palms of his hands and his feet, pinning him to the fence. He had been repeatedly stabbed with bayonets... There is not a man in the ranks of the Canadians who fought at Ypres who is not firmly convinced that this vile thing has been done. They know, too, that the enemy bayoneted their wounded and helpless comrades in the trenches.[18]

The correspondent admitted that he had 'not heard that any of our men saw the crime committed', but still found 'room for the supposition that the man was dead before he was pinned to the fence, and that the enemy in his insensate rage and hate of the English wreaked his vengeance on the lifeless body of his foe'. Gibbs was probably right about the effect this had on Canadians. Robert Graves, who also disbelieved the story, blamed it for causing Canadians to earn what he claimed was 'the worst reputation for violence against prisoners'.[19]

Almost any anti-Hun propaganda appearing in a Northcliffe paper was reprinted in the German press, but outrage at the story of the crucified Canadian was submerged under the weight of horrified reaction to the 'crimes' chronicled in the Bryce Report. To Germans, the *Report of the British Committee on Alleged German Outrages presented to both Houses of Parliament by Viscount Bryce* was outrageous enough in itself, but they seethed with indignation at British press reaction, which began the same day as unfounded British claims of the capture of Fromelles and Aubers. The Bryce committee was made up of 'men of the highest

standing in the fields of law, diplomacy, and history', who supposedly proceeded 'on the most cautious lines, omitting any deposition in which they found something too exceptional'. Even so, the committee's chronicle of German crimes was a travesty.[20]

Ernst Jünger whitewashed the German front-line soldier with the claim that, although his 'foot came down on the earth so grimly [he] may claim this at least; that it came down cleanly'. Not so, considering that at least 6,000 French and Belgian civilians, most of them innocent of the *franc tirage* that turned paranoid German soldiers into trigger-happy assassins, were put to death in August–September 1914. Even so, the most severe cases of military misconduct against civilians were punished and German soldiers rarely, if ever, descended to the depths of depravity implied as routine in the Bryce report. Hearsay evidence was enough for the *Times* to describe these claims as being backed by 'conclusive proof'. 'We do not hesitate to say that no such record of infamy has ever been established against a Government and a people by evidence of equal weight.' The committee members, 'unanimous in their findings', judged the 'evidence with the utmost impartiality'. While admitting any plea 'in favour of the accused', they concluded that 'Murder, lust and pillage prevailed over many parts of Belgium on a scale unparalleled in any war between civilized nations during the last three centuries.'

> It is not easy in the face of these enormities [to] assent without qualification to the view that the Germans are a kindly people. At all events, the professors and the militarists [have] instilled into them the sanctity of war, and have thoroughly brutalized them in the process. We are fighting to exterminate that doctrine. We are fighting also to prevent its advocates from applying it [to] our English homes, our wives, our daughters, and our little children. That is avowedly their darling purpose. What man will refuse his all to defeat it?[21]

Since it did provide the Germans with an admirable piece of counter-propaganda, perhaps the last sentence was a mistake. With 'voluntarism' unable to fill the British armies, Bryce's abominable 'collection of lies' could be presented as a plot designed to compel, or shame, Britons into joining up. This line was pioneered by the semi-official *Kölnische Zeitung* and taken up by the bourgeois press in unison.

> This new official collection of despicable lies [is] intended to whip up people to join the army, and improve England's wretched military situation. The same purpose is served by the calumny, published in English newspapers [that] Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria has ordered that no English prisoners be taken and that all English be shot. It is the same with the lie of the three [*sic*] Canadian officers [*sic*] nailed to a cross, and also with the curiously indifferent attitude of the English

> police in the face of the mob's excesses against Germans following the sinking of the Lusitania. Calumny is England's best weapon, and now that she is in the water up to her neck, she is making the most extensive use of it.[22]

As the *Times* was ever fond of pointing out, the mentality that encouraged the sinking of passenger liners and the commission of bestial crimes was inevitable in a society where the creed of might is right had been drummed into the minds of the population by its academics and militarists. The Germans never bothered to repudiate this argument. Instead they proudly acknowledged *Militarismus* as a purely German ideology, proclaiming it to be a practical manifestation of that *Idealism* which motivated the world's most-cultured people. To underpin this claim, they invoked the support of ghosts such as Kant, Hegel, Scholar, Goethe, Beethoven, Treitschke, Schopenhauer, Wagner and above all Nietzsche, defying other nations to produce a list of similar greats. Many of these long-dead and not-so-long-dead greats would doubtless have been horrified to find themselves listed as prophets of such a creed. But if anyone was posthumously defamed by this ideology based upon submission to state, love of war, blind obedience and docility it was Nietzsche, the philosopher who had himself once averred that 'nowhere am I read worse than in the Fatherland'. A vulgarized and bowdlerized Nietzsche, in large part the work of his unscrupulous sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, was simultaneously dammed by the Allies and extolled by the Germans, and for much the same reasons. Nietzsche was turned into an anti-Semitic hyper-nationalist; an advocate of might is right and Germanic racial supremacy. All his criticisms of Germany and the Germans, the *Kaiserreich* and nationalism *per se*, were ignored – or glossed over as the momentary aberrations of a man who, after all, did go mad.[23]

What was regarded as a seminal essay on the philosopher and his meaning was written shortly after Neuve Chapelle. Professor Dr Walter Jesinghaus was a close friend of Elisabeth and wrote with her obvious blessing. Dismissing British attempts to present Nietzsche as the man whose 'philosophy was instrumental in educating us Germans to favour war and finally propelling us into war', he nevertheless claimed that his hero would have been 'filled with the ardour of holy enthusiasm if he had been allowed to experience what we had felt in the first days of August and on until the present day'. As 'proof' of this, he cited a letter received from the oracular Elisabeth. 'How proud and happy my brother would have been', she wrote, 'for this Germany!' Jesinghaus now used Nietzsche to justify the idea that a 'super race' must first show itself willing to 'employ all its might in order to develop to the full, all its physical, spiritual and moral abilities'. War was not an 'end in itself' or even 'the means of protecting and defending laboriously acquired works of culture from robbers and invaders', but the means by which one acquired 'the virtue of pure and noble conviction' that came from sharing in 'the great *Volksgemeinschaft*'. A generation later, Adolf Hitler could hardly have put it better.[24]

Only by ignoring Nietzsche's most pointed observations could Elisabeth and Jesinghaus, or the pseudo-philosophers (including Hitler) of the Nazi era, convert their idol into a prophet justifying what *they* stood for. True, Nietzsche saw liberal western democracy as decadent, but then so too was Germany's supposed post-1871 *Sonderweg* (special way). 'All our political theories and constitutions – and the German *Reich* is by no means an exception – are consequences, necessary consequences of decline; the unconscious effect of decadence has assumed mastery over the ideal of some of the sciences.' This alleged arch patriot regarded Goethe as 'the last German for whom I feel any reverence'. He also wondered 'why, after all, I write in German'.

> They are my enemies; I confess it, these Germans. [They] have on their conscience everything half-hearted, three-eighths hearted! – of which Europe is sick; they also have on their conscience the most unclean kind of Christianity that there is, the most incurable, the most irrefutable: Protestantism. If we do not get rid of Christianity, it will be the fault of the *Germans*...
>
> The Germans themselves have no future.[25]

In 1950, Walter Kaufmann thought that Nietzsche 'may have contributed, however inadvertently', to Hitler's 'happy misconception about the English as essentially effete and hedonistic, which so fortunately aided his defeat'. When Kaufmann wrote this, it was assumed that Hitler had first-hand knowledge of Nietzsche's works. We know now that such assertions can be taken with Kershaw's 'pinch of salt'. Hitler probably did read the 'fortunate' phrase ('Man does not strive for pleasure, only the Englishman does') in Jesinghaus' essay, or in articles (some by Elisabeth Nietzsche herself) in the German press of the first two years of the war.[26]

German propaganda using Nietzsche to deprecate English 'decadents' could never be fully effective against troops whose experience told them otherwise, particularly after their own battle reports began to contain warnings against taking British troops too lightly. Yet, contempt for the English was not all that German soldiers were meant to extract from the works of Nietzsche, so much so, according to Jesinghaus that:

> [Besides] the New Testament... Nietzsche's 'Zarathustra' [is] the most needed spiritual nourishment for our young soldiers. Nietzsche has divined for us what the game is all about. Thereupon he raises himself out his grave and strides throughout the long rows of our warriors and our entire people and cries out to us: 'fight the holy fight for your freedom and your culture! The death of the individual is nothing compared to what shall be achieved. Hold firm until an honourable end!'[27]

Poor Nietzsche! How he would have turned in his grave at the thought that a book by the man who had also written *The Antichrist* might share pride of place in a German soldier's knapsack beside the principal book of the religion he most despised. The evidence suggests that Hitler read Jesinghaus' plea, remembered it, and acted upon it. In the Second World War, Wehrmacht soldiers were able to carry into battle special tunic-pocket-sized popular editions of both works.

German outrage at being depicted as barbarians was mollified by the belief that theirs was the *Kulturstaat* or *Kulturnation* par excellence, and that the worst of Allied accusations were rooted in jealousy. Yet, attempts to present themselves (and not the Latins) as the true inheritors of Greco-Roman civilization – an idea also much cultivated by the National Socialists – created a rich field for derision. Professor Ludwig Woltmann, the foremost articulator of Romance civilization's Germanic roots, became a figure of fun to more than one French journalist with his claims that the Renaissance was the product of Teutons. As 'proof', Woltmann claimed as Germanics Michelangelo Buonarotti (Bonroth), Leonardo da Vinci (Winke), the whole Medici (Mädicke) clan as well as Giotto (Jötte), Bellini (Bellin), Botticelli (Bottke) and even St Francis of Assisi, whose mother was named Pica (Bick)! When unsubstantiated linguistic 'evidence' could not be fashioned, Woltmann claimed head shape, blond to reddish or light-brown hair and grey-blue to blue-green eyes 'proved' the Germanic origins of Savaronola, Thomas de Aquino and Machievelli. He concluded his study with a bizarre 'talent' chart, in which Tuscany and Venice (with the highest percentage of blue-eyed blondes) produced 36 geniuses per million inhabitants against nil to two for the south-Italian provinces and Sardinia.[28]

Woltmann's 'seminal' work of 1905 was widely accepted in German academic circles during the Great War and reprinted, with a foreword by Heinrich Class, in Nazi times. By presenting the Teutons as the supreme culture-giver and culture-bearer, Woltmann was following Gobineau and Hewston Stewart Chamberlain, whose influence he freely acknowledged. If German art, German literature or German philosophy sprang from the soul of the *Volk* and the blood and soil of the nation, then there must be a similarly rooted German psychology, which owed nothing to Enlightenment values and should be protected from the corrupting philosophies of Western societies. As the 'most significant racial psychologist', leading advocate and 'rector' of 'German philosophy', Wilhelm Wundt's book *Die Nationen und ihre Philosophie, ein Kapitel zum Weltkrieg* was reviewed by Dr Otto Conrad in the *Berliner Tageblatt* on 3 May 1915. There was nothing original in Conrad–Wundt's 'definition' of *Volk*, which could serve, and possibly did serve, the Nazis.

> Volk signifies a spiritual community, a living unity, which is certainly as enigmatic as anything else that lives. Not that it would be simply an arithmetical sum of members of the community, it is a higher synthesis. Indeed this community is like the blossoms and leaves that live as one only on the tree, thus it signifies a real socio-physical form.[29]

There was, of course, not only a German *Volk*, but also a Russian, a French and an English *Volk*, all possessing inherited and acquired distinctions, and all of them intrinsically inferior to the Herrenvolk. To the Germans alone, 'what is originally free, truthful and inwardly felt – even when it belongs in a foreign people – that is German! It is the spirit of *Idealism*, which is unique to the entire German philosophy, since it descends from the deepest essence of the German racial spirit.' 'The will to duty' was the 'most valued possession' of the German Volk, for it inspired *Militarismus* – which had 'lived' in the German soul 'since time immemorial' – and was 'autonomous with the duty to be victorious'. In their belief in this 'idealistic principle', Kant, Fichte, Scholar, Goethe, Schliermacher and Hegel were 'all as one'. But the 'last great representative of German *Idealism*' was, once again, Friedrich Nietzsche.

> Wundt says of him that he has, without perhaps himself knowing it... led to the rebirth of German *Idealism*. Nietzsche's ethic disavows the striving after pleasure... 'What is your greatest possible experience', says Zarathustra, 'that is the hour of contempt, the hour when you say: what use is my pleasure.' – Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is unconditionally committed to duty: You shall give yourself up to the task for which you were put in the world! By the way, Wundt himself also belongs in the ranks of the great representatives of German *Idealism*; his ethic bears the best witness to that.[30]

Even that master of the mixed metaphor, Adolf Hitler, could hardly have surpassed Conrad's image of German *Idealism* 'flooding through the soul of the *Volk* like a living fire'. *Militarismus*, which 'our enemies revile as materialistic', was nothing but the 'expression of *Idealism*'. As such, it was not to be confused with *English* militarism, which involved sending 'Irish and Scottish mercenaries' along with coloured troops from India to fight for them because the Englishmen 'preferred to stay home'. '"No", proclaimed Wundt, "we will not take the good advice of our enemies to abolish Militarismus".'

> We also require it for the future, not merely because we need to be armed on the land as well as the sea in order to preserve peace, but because the universal duty to serve has become a means of education, which confers upon our youth bodily competence and a strict devotion to duty in peaceful occupations... 'Militarismus' in this sense is a character trait in the being of the German people. It signifies the unconditional subordination of the individual to the [social] whole.[31]

War, according to Conrad, 'compels in us all a great duty. "We are not on this earth to be happy, rather to do our duty", said Bismarck. *Militarismus* is really in essence *Idealism*.' In this conviction, all 'admirers of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer [are] drawn together'.

German *Idealism* has been restored, even among those for whom in the long years of peace it had been lost. It stirs itself as the *Idealism* for action in the soul of the common man, who has perhaps investigated all [other] systems and found satisfaction in none. The act is worth more here than all philosophy. This *Idealism* will lead the German people to victory![32]

9

HUGO GUTMANN AND THE GOOD SOLDIER MEND

On 25 September 1915, the British launched an attack near Fromelles, designed to act as a feint to draw attention from their main offensive by La Bassée. This began with mine explosions and an artillery barrage, which first zeroed in on regimental headquarters. Indeed this came under such heavy fire that the staff was forced to find shelter in the orderlies' dugout. Finally, Hitler was sent out with Schmidt to reconnoitre the situation. The two men raced towards the trenches 'in the face of horror and death. Across the open land, progress by jumping, running and diving is all that was possible.' They returned safely, but with the news that the enemy had brought large cylinders to the Front. With the breeze blowing towards the Germans, a gas attack seemed imminent. 'Shall I describe the terror', wrote Brandmayer, 'the confused search for cover so that we might save our tiny lives? No, I prefer not to cloak it in words!' These Bavarians had no experience of gas, but had heard rumours that made it into a terror weapon against which the deepest dugout was no defence and a hideous death seemed a likely fate. Mend, riding from Fromelles to Fournes, became aware of 'a severe itch in the nose and difficulty breathing'. It had drifted into the house of Black Mary, who asked how her 'boys' – 'the scrawny black one (Hitler) and the blonde (Schmidt)' – were making out in Fromelles. 'Black Mary must also have sniffed a little gas.' She pleaded with Mend 'to give her a mask. Unable to help, I could only tell her to hold her nose.' Her discomfort did not last long, for the breeze had shifted and 'already behind Fournes the gas was gradually dispersing'.[1]

From the staff dugout at Fromelles Hitler was again sent out to reconnoitre, this time with Brandmayer. The gas by now offered little threat, but British gunners were still active. On the return leg, the two dispatch runners found themselves in the middle of a counter-barrage.

> Stones and iron fragments whizzed above our heads. We bent low, racing across open country. I could scarcely lift myself from the ground any

> more [and] still Hitler urged me onwards, onwards! I cannot understand how Hitler could look around, with no cover... while calling to me: 'Brandmoari, get up!' He seemed without nerves... Sweat dug deep rivulets into our faces. More falling than running we reached the command dugout. Paralyzing tiredness weighed like lead on my burning limbs. I threw off my helmet and webbing and sunk dead tired onto my bunk. I expected Adolf to do the same, but how wrong I was! As I turned round, I saw him sitting near the exit, helmet on head, buckled up and waiting for the next order. 'You're crazy!' I cried out angrily. 'How would you know', was his prompt reply. There was no man under his uniform, only a skeleton... He had an iron nature.[2]

Brandmayer was not the only one infuriated by Hitler. Other orderlies wanted to throw 'their boots at his head', for at the first sounds of firing in the distance, 'he'd pace around, weapon in hand [and] no one could get any more sleep'.[3]

This British offensive soon petered out. 'The captured Indians and Englishmen were happy to be escaping Hell.' In Fournes, Mend found 70 prisoners, including Indians, who were told by a Bavarian officer that they could 'lie down and rest, for they looked exhausted. First the officers and then the men were interrogated through a translator.' Trouble followed. Some of the 'white Englishmen', assuming an Indian had betrayed information to the German, set upon him and threw him to the ground, where they continued to kick and beat him. German guards intervened.

> By signs and gestures the Indians thanked them for their help and with clenched fists and gnashing teeth expressed their anger towards their white comrades. A German-speaking Englishman, who had stood aside indifferently during the scuffle, explained that there had been bad blood between the coloureds and his people even before the battle. In lower-Bavarian dialect, one of our pioneers let it be known that it suited him just fine if the 'black devils' fought the English. The Englishman shook his head uncomprehendingly: 'What did he say?'[4]

The European battle season was now over. October 1915, being dry and unseasonably warm, would have permitted its prolongation had either side possessed the means or inclination. The inevitable November rains were followed by a plague of rats. While the pioneers laboured building blockhouses and pillboxes, rat hunting in the trenches and the house of Black Mary became a sport (at which Hitler excelled). The dispatch runners still had dispatches to carry and sometimes Hitler returned from the trenches 'dead-tired and looking as if he'd had a mud bath'. On such occasions 'he drank his tea, ate his bread and jam, then threw himself onto his bunk', covered from head to foot in mud, and without uttering a word. He was not always so taciturn. When the mood took him, he could turn a friendly chat among the men into a bitter forum for

political debate. 'The peace was often disrupted by a violent political argument.' At about this time too, Hitler was announcing to anyone else prepared to listen 'that we would hear much more about him. We'd only have to wait until his time came.'[5]

By late November, the combination of continuous icy-cold rain and rat-spread disease had wreaked havoc on the health of the men, more being lost to sickness than enemy activity. Hitler, who in 'twenty-three months had not once spent half a day in Lille, had never taken home-leave and never once reported sick', at last became ill. December 1915 was one of his most miserable months of the war. He looked 'very sick and coughed heavily, but none of us could convince him that he should report to the doctor'. Hitler took his turn with other men to spend rest days at the Chateau La Valée, but even there, they 'had no real opportunity to dry themselves'.

> Many lay in wet clothes with a high fever on wet bunks in the barracks. Only a few were able to dry their uniforms in the ovens installed there, most therefore, returned on the march to the Front with the same wet covering they'd arrived in. Clinging to the body and soaked through with mud and dirt, these bits of uniform offered no protection at all against the cold. Mass illness was the inevitable consequence and whole companies had to be placed on sick leave by the doctor. The only advantage that our troops had during the wet season was they had no need to fear an attack by the enemy, for they were just as badly off.[6]

Bitterly cold rain poured down over Christmas, filling trenches and creating thick, slimy mud. Hitler was so tired that 'when he came back from the trenches at night, he often lay down on his wooden bunk in wet clothes'. A flood of presents and food parcels arrived, but none for Hitler.

> During the three days of Christmas, he spoke not a word to anyone, and we were unable to explain why he was so surly. At that time he was perhaps taking it to heart that everyone at home had forgotten him and that nobody had sent either a Christmas greeting or present... When he returned from a mission on Christmas Day, he sat deep in thought, sunk in a corner with his helmet still on his head, and no one was capable of stirring him out of his apathy.[7]

In the beginning of this third year of the war, the List Regiment 'for the first time since leaving Germany received a long, well-deserved rest period in divisional reserve'. Some of the men, Hitler among them, took part in a parade before Ludwig III, the Bavarian king. Hitler was by now over his Christmas blues and the regiment was a hive of creative activity, in which everyone 'whittled the time away doing as he pleased'.

> The musicians composed, the technicians drew and prepared themselves for their future professional practice [while] Adolf Hitler occupied himself principally with literature and painting. With great skill, he caricatured Viennese Jewish types. Everything went peacefully until the difficult problem of politics was broached... Hitler did all the talking.[8]

In the third week of January, Hitler and Schmidt went home to Black Mary. Their 'land-lady' made her 'boys' welcome as usual. Hitler was always considerate and obliging with the elderly French woman as he was towards 'wounded prisoners, and civilians forced to remain in the combat zone'. The few men left in Fournes were old, while the few young women, in Hitler's paranoia, must have seemed like wanton Loreleis ready to lead German men to miscegenation. 'He never entered into flirtations', Mend wrote, 'we called him "woman-hater". Sometimes he peered at me, asking me if I entertained myself with French women and I had to put up with some remark by him.' While Mend had no time for Hitler's prudery, he shared his racism. As the winter of 1915–16 thawed and New Army or dominion troops replaced the 'coloured Englishmen', there was relief all round. Bavarians had not volunteered to be killed or maimed by racial inferiors. Mend had 'more compassion for blue-eyed Englishmen than our other opponents, for race just cannot be denied. I could also never understand how blood-relatives could so cruelly murder each other.'[9]

Anti-Semitism appears to have been rampant among the dispatch runners. They, like most of the men in the List Regiment, had come of age during a period of rising anti-Semitism. Jews were often regarded, in Treitschke's words, as having a 'profoundly implanted dread of arms'. Yet, in the Great War, they enlisted in German forces at a level proportional to their numbers in German society and endured more than the expected casualty rate. In addition, about half the Jews who served were decorated. But the false idea that they were not pulling their weight was given increasing credence from late 1915 through a campaign and subsequent inquiry (in which Heinrich Class took a leading role), which sought to question and discredit the patriotism of Germany's Jews. Fully backed by the pan-German press, this campaign rapidly gained the support of other patriotic leagues and, in the words of Clemens Picht, the 'sympathy, if not the open support of the war ministry and the army'. The fact that the patriotism of Jews was being questioned was proof of guilt to anti-Semites. Already it was an article of faith to Brandmayer, Mend and Hitler that Jews intrigued 'so that a decoration or promotion was practically a formality in advance', and that they had a 'qualification-pass for officer in their pocket'.[10]

As far as Mend was concerned, Jews avoided combat as much as was possible. 'Many Jews were "busy" at the base', he claimed asserting that 'for the most part their achievements had little to do with those of a serving soldier'. Jews would conspire to be 'transferred to more agreeable duties, which Christian, academically trained comrades with far greater achievements were unable to attain'. While Wiedemann thought Gutmann a brave and dependable officer, the resentment

of some dispatch runners focussed on this Jewish officer. Years later, as German armies poured into the Soviet Union, Hitler told confidants: 'we had in my regiment a Jew named Guttmann [*sic*], who was the most terrible coward. He had the Iron Cross, First Class. It was revolting.' Mend appears to have witnessed an expression of the bad blood between Hitler and Gutmann in December 1915.

> I met Adolf Hitler on the road to La Vallée. While we spoke... our Jewish adjutant G. called to us, and, as Adolf Hitler wanted to make no gesture of honour to him, he hid behind a poplar stump. He was however seen by the officer and expected to stand and answer, but Hitler refused to acknowledge him... [The] conceited G. became increasingly annoyed and with the threat that he wanted to put Hitler on a punishment report, he rode on. As Hitler went up to me again, he said: 'I recognize this Jew as an officer only in the battle area [if] he really had to go just once into the trenches, then he would likely creep away into every mouse-hole'.[11]

Mend's descriptions of Hitler's actions depict the anti-Semite that most of his comrades perceived Hitler to be. Naturally enough, Mend's story runs counter to the theory that Hitler's anti-Semitism only manifested itself after the war, and then largely out of political opportunism. For those who argue on these lines, Mend's word has to be discredited. Ignoring Mend for the moment, is it conceivable that Adolf Hitler – a man brought up in the thoroughly anti-Semitic environment of Linz and who was susceptible to and influenced by ideologies which possessed, as essential components, religious and racially based anti-Semitism – would have managed to live through the first two decades of the twentieth century without becoming an anti-Semite, or at least influenced by anti-Semitic beliefs? It is indeed possible that Hitler had Jewish acquaintances in Vienna and, perhaps, Munich in the years before the Great War. But one can sell sketches and watercolours through a Jewish middleman and remain an anti-Semite. In the sometimes-harsh economic world that Hitler knew before 1914, survival may have depended upon him supping with the devil.

At this point, it seems appropriate to consider the character, life and words of the shadowy and controversial figure of Hans Mend. It is alleged that after the Great War, Mend turned his hand to petty crime and confidence trickery. Yet he also appears to have maintained close links with the Nazis (who never claimed to admire or even like him) and particularly his old wartime comrade, Adolf Hitler. When Mend, doubtless for financial reasons, suggested that he might write a trench memoir based on Hitler, the Nazi leader at first welcomed the prospect. Hitler subsequently changed his mind, and his rejection of Mend's *Mit Adolf Hitler im Felde* might have perhaps fuelled the idea that this memoir was not Mend's final word on the subject. Indeed in a so-called Mend Protocol of a later date, he is alleged to have repudiated almost everything that he had written about Hitler in his 1931 book. Yet the real author of this purported protocol appears to have been not Mend, but Friedrich Schmidt Noerr, a writer and philosopher

active in the anti-Nazi movement. Schmidt Noerr later insisted that his version of events was based on Mend's word, and that the 'author' was no petty crook, rather a 'healthy son of the soil', who became 'a celebrated [and] dashing dispatch rider' during the war.[12]

Scholars who have an obvious interest in discrediting Mend are met head-on by others whose arguments depend upon the credibility of the 'Protocol'. In these interpretations, Mend is presented as a decent if somewhat misguided rustic, even as a pioneer hero of the anti-Nazi resistance. For example, Lothar Machtan's 'proof' of Hitler's homosexuality is grounded in the validity and credibility of the Protocol. Machtan claims that Schmidt Noerr in 1936, some three years before Mend's death, conducted an 'exhaustive interrogation' of the former dispatch rider, with the aim of gathering evidence to use against Hitler should he be deposed and brought to trial. This posthumous 'testimony' of a man who had been one of Hitler's closest comrades during the war would show Germans that they had been misled by a psychopath and homosexual; a man who shirked his duty as a soldier and was so devoid of political convictions that he might even have become a Communist. Machtan accepts 'the historical-political status' of Schmidt Noerr's Protocol on the basis that 'persons of high rank and reputation have assumed its contents to be credible'. Endorsement of 'high-rank' is no proof. As Anton Joachimsthaler put it: 'One can only shake one's head [over] the more than fantasy-filled evidence of Professor Schmidt-Noerr.' And, one might add, the fantasy-filled evidence of Lothar Machtan.[13]

It is possible that Schmidt Noerr discussed Hitler and the Great War with Mend. Yet, his version of what Mend is supposed to have said is full of errors and contradictions that Mend would know to be untrue. What reason could Mend have had to risk a further term in Dachau, and possibly his life, by making wild accusations for the benefit of Hitler's enemies? His death shortly afterwards meant that he could never be questioned about an unseen document whose existence was not mentioned until after the Second World War. In Schmidt Noerr's account, Hitler, as described by Mend, was an unemployed layabout living from hand to mouth in Munich in 1914 (he was actually making a living from the sale of paintings). In order to find food and lodgings (he could afford full board in the Popp household and occasionally dined with the family) he sought to enlist in the Bavarian forces. Having failed his army medical, he waited outside the royal palace until the Bavarian king appeared, whom he pestered until the king promised to smooth his entry into a Bavarian regiment! Hitler's wartime job as dispatch runner kept him out of danger. He never touched a weapon in the war and lingered in backwaters, 'painting, talking politics, and having altercations'. An active and open homosexual, he was also a psychopath who bore the nickname 'crazy Adolf'.[14]

If Mend told Schmidt Noerr any of this, he was being reckless, mendacious, delusional, or pulling the professor's leg. Machtan describes Mend as 'simple, but enterprising'. Mend may also have been naïve, but he was not so stupid as to discredit Hitler the soldier. Particularly so since he knew Hitler to be a brave

man, entitled to wear both the Iron Crosses, which could not be won by an NCO who idled in backwaters and never 'volunteered for combat duty'. Mend also knew that Gutmann, as regimental adjutant, proposed Hitler for the first-class award in 1918. Yet, 'his' Protocol mentions only an Iron Cross Second Class, gained for tending Engelhardt *after* he was brought from the Front in 1914. This, supposedly, was awarded on the recommendation of Gutmann, who was then a junior officer in no position to recommend anyone. And what of 'Red Hitler'? – The representative of 'the class-conscious proletariat' and Marxist internationalist? The contents of the 'inflammatory political speeches' he could 'never forbear' from delivering to comrades can be imagined![15]

Even without Schmidt Noerr's 'Mend' Protocol, there was enough in what Mend *did* write in *Mit Adolf Hitler im Felde* to disturb Hitler. When the book appeared in 1931, it was seized upon by the Nazis as counter-propaganda to material in left-wing and liberal-democratic newspapers, who were seeking to discredit Hitler's war record. Given its initial Nazi endorsement, the book was quickly dismissed by the Left; Egon Erwin Kisch calling it 'the military supplement' to *Mein Kampf*. Nevertheless, while Mend – the 'dashing dispatch rider' – rarely faced the dangers experienced by dispatch runners, the background material he offered is realistic, accords with other sources, and provides his memoir with a definite sense of authenticity. Even so, Hitler was unhappy. Mend admired Hitler the soldier, but there was something overblown and tokenistic about his praise, as though he was doing his duty to a man for whom he had no liking. Hitler was too able a propagandist not to realize that Mend's bursts of hagiography pushed praise into unbelievable, ludicrous territory and was justified at feeling unease about some of Mend's descriptions of him. Choosing his words carefully, Mend suggested that Hitler was neurotic and eccentric, unmilitary in appearance, and given to outbursts of rage and morbid behaviour. As well, he hinted strongly that he thought Hitler as sexually repressed and fearful of women. In 1931, two years from achieving power, there was nothing for Hitler to do about a commercially published book beyond hoping that only its more positive descriptions stayed in public memory. After he did achieve power, he lost no time in arranging for its author to spend a term in Dachau, banning the book and ensuring that all unsold copies were seized and pulped.[16]

It is difficult to imagine why Mend might have fabricated his account of Hitler's late-1915 encounter with Gutmann. On the surface, it may seem that Hitler derived a kind of perverse benefit as an anti-Semitic politician, since the story confirms that he was already a confirmed anti-Semite in that early stage of the war. Yet, it is unlikely that Hitler would be flattered, let alone pleased, by the account. He well knew (as did Mend and any serving soldier) that a soldier in the German armies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was obliged under threat of the severest punishment to show respect for the uniform, no matter what he might think about the man who wore it. By showing disrespect to the authority Gutmann represented, Hitler was committing a gross breach of military discipline. Mend thus shows us a man prepared to pick and choose the

authority whom he would respect; a man who later, as all-powerful Führer, demanded nothing less than the total loyalty and obedience of a whole nation. Mend also implied that Hitler knew precisely what he was doing, telling us that although he 'hated them', Hitler's behaviour towards other Jewish officers was 'constantly correct'. Hitler's show of dumb insolence can have done little for the promotion prospects of an Austrian national in the German Army.[17]

In January 1916, the List Regiment returned to familiar positions around Fromelles and Fournes. Prussian units from the Eastern Front were moving into the line. Old Western Front hands saw these reinforcements as men who had had an easy time against the poorly equipped, ill-trained and badly led Peasant soldiers of Tsarist Russia. For Bavarians, it was bad enough to find themselves beside complacent Eastern Front troops, worse that they should be Prussians. The memory of being 'let down' by a Prussian division in the counter-attack at Neuve Chapelle still rankled. Hitler was enraged when he heard a Prussian major tell his men how 'their innate discipline and courage' could achieve 'what other [Bavarian] troops were incapable of and expel the stubbornly entrenched enemy from his position'. When he heard Prussians deprecating British troops Hitler reacted with sarcasm: 'Oh, here in the West it's not bad, as you've just heard from your major.' As they moved out of earshot he remarked, 'they're going to have heavy losses under him. He was not wrong.'[18]

In February 1916, the rain eased enough for the men to dry out. The weather remained bitter but the front-line troops kept warm restoring trenches that had collapsed or become waterlogged. Live-and-let-live reigned. Turbans, peaky-pointed hats, tropical helmets and even some of the first British 'earth-coloured steel-helmets' were observed in the trenches opposite. So busy were the troops on both sides that they rarely bothered to fire on one another. Regimental casualties in the winter months of January and February amounted to 16 dead and 70 wounded. Even in April the List Regiment still lost only 6 dead and 40 wounded. On 9 May, against a background of increasing enemy artillery fire, 'one of the most special honour days of the regiment' was celebrated in a special parade conducted by regimental commander Spatny and divisional commander Scanzoni. Daily now, signs of increasing enemy activity and confidence originated from what the Bavarians called the 'Australian position' opposite. The List Regiment's day of glory in the Great War was at hand.[19]

10

FROMELLES 1916

For most of the war the battlefield near Fromelles was one of the quietest on the Western Front. But on the occasions when serious fighting did erupt there, it could also claim to be one of the bloodiest. On these occasions the BEF did most of the bleeding, with the German division responsible for the carnage being the 6th BRD. The second of these encounters, in May 1915 as part of what the British call the Battle of Aubers Ridge, preceded the third by some 14 months. This third British offensive, utilizing one English and one Australian division, was on a smaller scale this time. Not even the Bavarians were inclined to describe it as a *Schlacht*, favouring instead the term *Gefecht* (fight or action). On the other side, since it was the Australian's first full-scale engagement of the Western Front, the Australian official history devotes 120 pages to what is called The Battle of Fromelles, while the British official history devotes a surprisingly large 17 pages, to a chapter entitled 'The Subsidiary Action at Fromelles'.

While they made considerable propaganda out of a minor Bavarian triumph, the action at Fromelles in July 1916 was of such minor importance that the German official history describes it in less than a paragraph. An important paragraph nevertheless, for it shows that Rupprecht expected an attack on his Sixth Army's left flank (as did Falkenhayn), and from late June to early July 1916, strengthened artillery in the sector and sent a Prussian division to reinforce the I Bavarian Reserve Corps. As for the actual 19–20 July engagement, the same source covers this in three brief sentences. 'On 19 July, a heavy [British] deployment of gas once again affected the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division south-west of Lille. The enemy attack pushed forward to the German trenches, where it could be completely beaten off. About 500 Englishmen remained as prisoners in the hands of the Bavarians.' The account in the Bavarian official history is more extensive and informative, even if it is only a discursive footnote running across three pages.

> Since the beginning of the great battle on the Somme and even earlier, the enemy had endeavoured to divert the attention and strength on the German side again and again in other directions.

> So it was to the west of Lille near Fromelles, where the 6th BRD... lay, and where from mid-June on it became ever livelier. On 19 July at 12.30 p.m., a barrage of cannon fire and mortars was laid down [in] the sector occupied by the 21st, 16th and 17th RIRs... But the batteries of the 6th BRD, for which the overwhelming English superiority in guns and aircraft made it certainly difficult to cope, in spite of this didn't hesitate to pour demoralizing fire into the English position, where English stormtroops were assembled... So the English attack, which finally left the trenches at 6.30 p.m., had already had its backbone broken. In cold blood and filled with jubilation, the men of the 16th RIR awaited [the] English attack and struck it down bloodily... In effect, the strength of the three regiments... succeeded by the early morning of 20 July in gradually freeing their position of English troops, massacring them or cutting them off. The booty included 500 prisoners and 20 machine guns. The 6th BRD can glory [in the fact] that without help it had frustrated the intentions of the enemy.[1]

It is difficult to believe that the British artillery, whose lack of success would be so roundly criticized by British survivors, enjoyed anything like the superiority claimed here. But then both sides in the Great War routinely maintained, and still do, that they were outnumbered or suffered from the effects of enemy superiority in materiel. Otherwise this Bavarian account is a reasonable summation of what transpired that night, when the List Regiment experienced its greatest success of the Great War.

Among the Australians and New Zealanders in the trenches facing the List Regiment during May–June 1916 were many battle-hardened Gallipoli veterans. Along with their less-experienced comrades, these men were impelled by a desire to prove themselves in what they considered to be the 'real' war. An Anzac prisoner was obviously bluffing when he told his Bavarian interrogator that the 'Australians had not known they were coming to France; if this had been known in Australia [few] volunteers would have enlisted'. The energetic and aggressive men from the Antipodes put an end to live-and-let-live. On 9 June the Bavarians reported Australians exploding 'a small mine 15 to 20 metres in front of their position'.

> At the same time enemy artillery and mortar fire increased, as often occurred in co-operation with increased patrol activity. The troops now opposing us were experienced fighters. Not only did our troops clash more often in no-man's-land [from] which both sides suffered many dead and wounded, but the enemy also succeeded in undertakings apparently designed to break into our trenches.[2]

These 'over-brave Tommies' (Anzacs) also had a sense of humour. One night they sent an invitation. 'We're having roast pork tonight. Do you want to come?'

By the end of the month the two most experienced Australian divisions, the 1st and 2nd, had left the nursery sector for the Somme, in readiness to take part in the long-awaited 'Big Push'. The arrival of the 4th Australian division that took their place maintained the activity at Fromelles. The Germans facing them hardly feared a full-scale offensive, though they knew that a diversionary action was likely.

> When we consider that the Battle of the Somme began on 24 June, then the significance of this increased enemy activity, as a flanking manoeuvre becomes clear. First small raids and increased artillery activity, then larger raids mixed with gas attacks and violent large-scale artillery and mortar barrages. The high point of this activity was the battle of Fromelles on 19 and 20 July.[3]

In this night action, the 6th BRD threw back two British divisions, one English and one Australian, and inflicted casualties on the latter which, given the action's scale and duration, were as intense as any suffered by a division of either side on the Western Front. Since the List Regiment held the position known as the Sugar-loaf from where the 15th Australian brigade was decimated, the regiment could claim the most prominent part in the massacre. The cold prose of the British *Imperial War Graves Commission* tells the story. The British 61st Division's loss of 1,313 officers and men (killed and wounded) pale beside those of the Australians.

> The Australian left and centre of the 5th Division reached the German trenches and held their second line during the day and night, but the right was held off by a fierce machine gun barrage and only reached the Frontline in isolated groups. The action was broken off in the morning of the 20th, after the 5th Australian Division had lost over 5,000 Officers and men.[4]

The actual figure was 5,553 killed, wounded and taken prisoner. In the 20 months since Becalaere, the List Regiment had become a battle-hardened and resourceful unit of garrison troops. From well-fortified positions against inexperienced men sent out on a hopeless task, the Bavarians cut a swathe. For every dead comrade, the 6th BRD could count five British (Australian or English) soldiers killed, an astonishing ratio even in a war where defenders held most of the cards.

The attack that the commander of the 15th Australian brigade subsequently described as being 'a tactical abortion' was called a 'lively skirmish', a 'stirring attack' or a 'large trench raid' by the Allies at the time. Even so, in a global context it was of minor significance. The Germans and the French were still tearing at each other in the attritional battle of Verdun, while closer to hand on the Somme, the *crème* of the British, French and German armies were committed to what was already called the greatest battle in history. Still, this sideshow at

Fromelles has meaning beyond the size of forces involved, the numbers killed, or even Basil Liddell Hart's depiction of it as a Somme or Passchendaele in microcosm. Not least, it may be read as providing a classic example of propaganda in the Great War, wherein one side disguised defeat or made it seem like victory, while the other over-inflated and glorified a minor success.[5]

The British intended this Fromelles action as a diversion to tie down German divisions that might otherwise be sent to the Somme. If all went well, it might also cause the Germans to think that a serious British offensive was under way in the north. This was wishful thinking. The Germans were given ample warning of the attack, were fully aware that only two BEF divisions could be involved and reasoned correctly that this forthcoming assault was local and confinable by the troops on hand. In May 1915, a far stronger British attack had been thwarted and since then, German sappers and infantrymen had laboured to make the Fromelles position even more secure. Yet, there was a kind of debased logic to the Fromelles 'stunt'. July–August 1916 marked one of Germany's bleakest periods in the war. With no end in sight to the bloody, attritional battle of Verdun, the Austrian army in the East near collapse and the Somme finely balanced, tying a few German divisions down in Flanders might yet help swing the Somme battle in the Allied favour. Thus, this attack at Fromelles was born.

In his *The Real War* of 1930, Basil Liddell Hart treated this engagement more seriously than a military one-night stand involving three divisions appeared to merit. It was, he argued, the product of a 'curious military delusion, for while simulated preparations for a large-scale offensive would cause the enemy natural apprehension, the actual delivery of a narrow-fronted local attack would merely disclose the bluff'. Its end result, the 'shattering of the 5th Australian Division in an absolutely advertised attack [became] final link in an almost incredibly muddled chain of causation'. The man largely credited with creating the muddle was General Sir Richard Haking. An 'urger', he would become as loathed by Australians as he was by British troops who survived his generalship at Aubers Ridge and Loos in 1915 – after which he was scathingly called the 'butcher'. Even so, Haking or his superior, Haig, cannot take all blame. An Australian historian, Robin Corfield, recently revealed the unhappy part played by ambitious, glory-hunting Australian commanders. While Fromelles is the worst defeat in Australia's brief military history, it is also the List Regiment's glory day (or night) of the war. The regimental history of 1932 devotes 23 pages to it; the same number accorded to the regiment's first taste of battle, at Becalaere and Gheluvelt in 1914.[6]

By 8 July 1916, British GHQ knew that dislodging the Germans from their positions on the Somme would be more difficult than imagined. Haking, whose XI Corps occupied the sector facing the 6th BRD, was instructed by GHQ to put forward a diversionary two-division scheme to break into the German frontlines near Fromelles and occupy the support trenches. Undeterred by memories of March and May 1915, Haking came up with a wild scheme to achieve all this and then push on to Aubers Ridge, from where his two divisions might threaten Lille.

Plumer of the Second Army dismissed this as 'ramshackle', but Haig, although he had doubts, gave approval with the proviso that Haking should cancel the attack if, once under way, he considered it too dangerous or counterproductive. On 13 July, it was agreed that an artillery bombardment should start the next day, leading to an attack on the 17th. Dogged by muddle and inclement weather, a slow British bombardment only began on the 16th. It caused few casualties, did little damage to the trenches, left the German wire uncut and gave admirable warning of an attack. With the barrage under way, GHQ decided the operation was unnecessary after all, but General Monro, Haking's immediate superior, assured GHQ that the guns and machinery were adequate, supplies sufficient and the troops were so keen that it would be a mistake to cancel the operation. Due to foul weather D-day came and went. On the 18th, with the weather still bad, Monro had second thoughts and sought approval to cancel the attack. GHQ washed its hands of it. Monro dithered, then decided to push ahead. The stage was set and the tragedy unfolded.[7]

It seems inconceivable that Monro and Haking could be optimistic about a scheme with so few prospects of success. Haking's two divisions were anything but the cream of the BEF. Where the Anzacs that had recently faced the Bavarians had been, for the most part, battle-hardened Gallipoli veterans, the 5th Australian Division, as one survivor put it, was made up of 'half-trained and half-disciplined soldiers', who had trained for the muddy and convoluted trenches of Flanders in the sands of Egypt! The English 61st (south Midland) Division was no better. Since the middle of 1915, this territorial unit had been milked of hundreds of its ablest men and officers to reinforce other divisions. It had little battle-schooling and lacked artillery. Most of its troops, particularly its junior officers and NCOs, were as raw as the Australians. Although he had commanded a corps at both Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge, Haking – a former academic responsible for the *Army Company Training Manual* of 1913 ('a most useful and helpful work') – had learnt little and had been consistently passed over for higher command. He was only too willing to 'urge' in order to further his career. Early in 1916, his memo to XI Corps stated:

> The Corps has been distinguished since its formation for the constant offensive action it has been called to carry out… It is of vital importance that every effort should be made from the highest to the lowest to foster and increase this spirit… [By] constantly harassing the enemy [we] can greatly improve the morale of our own troops and wear out and depress the enemy. [The] natural desire of the troops to have a quiet time in the trenches must be discouraged in every possible way.[8]

His 'achievements' are measurable from the casualties in his sector: while the 6th BRD in the *first six months* of 1916 lost 400 men killed and 1,200 wounded and its Prussian neighbours less, two Australian divisions lost 598 killed and 1,725 wounded in just two months. On one night, a New Zealand *regiment* lost 8 officers

and 150 men killed. Haking was not only putting colonials to the sword. The under-strength 61st Division suffered 250 raiding casualties days before going into battle on 19 July.[9]

As the day of the battle approached, the Australian brigade commanders, spurred on by their divisional commander General J.J. McCay, were keen that their untried troops should beat experienced Gallipoli division to the honour of being the first Anzacs into a full-scale Western Front battle. So the assault was launched in the late afternoon of 19 July. The artillery continued to be ineffective, leaving the 'Sugarloaf' and other emplacements unscathed and allowing withering fire from these strongpoints to cut a swathe through troops who had been told by their brigade commander, 'Boys, you won't find a German when you get there!' The Anzacs did dispute two lines of German trenches where, according to the Bavarians, they were beaten off. The Australian official history also claims that some Australians went beyond the German trenches, but the 6th BRD's Order of the Day on 20 July 1916 suggests they only 'penetrated into the foremost position of the division on a front of some 700 metres'. There they were 'seized by the troops of the division on both sides and attacked from the front. Those who were not rescued by the enemy during their retreat were wiped-out or captured during the night.'[10]

On the morning of the 20th, masses of dead and wounded lay in no-man's-land. A truce enabled stretcher-bearers to bring in many wounded and during the late afternoon, German light railways carried carloads of dead to Fournes for burial. While some men from the 61st Division did manage to approach the Sugarloaf, this division's lack of progress had exposed the right flank of the Australian 15th brigade to a barrage of fire, unjustly inflaming Anzac perceptions of English ineptitude. The attack, described in British accounts as 'a raid', saw two divisions utterly shattered. Of the 5,533 men lost by the Australians, 1,917 were killed, 3,146 wounded and 470 taken prisoners. Hardest hit was the ill-fated Australian 15th Brigade, which lost 824 men killed. The 61st Division lost 1,607, of whom over 500 were killed. After the war, Edmonds pointed out that the 'losses of some of the divisions at 2nd Ypres [were] all far heavier', but not, he should have added, in engagements lasting 12 hours.[11]

At daybreak on 19 July, the Bavarians, with ample warning, were ready and waiting. The feeble on–off artillery bombardment of the previous three days had achieved little beyond warning of an impending attack. This was confirmed on the morning of the 19th when, at 9 a.m., the bombardment resumed and, in Wiedemann's words, 'brought the trenches and hinterland under increasingly strong fire'.

> At 1.45 p.m. this took on the distinct character of a barrage, from the right and left flanks as well as the Front, fire came from heavy, medium and light artillery, accompanied by heavy and medium mortars. The fire from the English artillery and mortars abated temporarily, only to swell by fits and starts to greater violence ... At 5 p.m. Englishmen reported

> [as being] in front of the Australian position were immediately brought under fire.[12]

Shortly afterwards, with all telephone lines shot away, dispatch runners were sent out with orders to ascertain what was happening in the first line of trenches. 'They came back reporting our trenches under the heaviest barrage, losses considerable and the damage to the position severe.'[13]

As dispatch runners, Hitler and Brandmayer were already in the thick of the action; Fromelles 1916 is the centrepiece of Brandmayer's memoir. Early in the evening, with telephone lines already 'shot up and useless', the pressure on dispatch runners became intense. 'We carried message after message from and to the trenches. Glaring flares lit our way. The Australians stormed for the fifth time vainly across the battlefield. Those who escaped the rain of bullets from our machine-guns, found certain death in the hurricane of the German artillery fire.' Nonetheless, in a 'segment of the 21st Reserve Infantry Regiment the enemy succeeded in breaking through'. It was only on 'the morning of 20 July' that a 'German counter-attack brought the position again into our possession.' Brandmayer and Hitler had dangerous work to do. 'I dashed with Hitler to the battle HQ of the 17th Regiment. He scarcely gave me time to get my breath back [before] we ran on to the 21st Regiment.'

> Grenades chased us through the darkness of the night; we rolled in time with them into a water-filled mine-crater. The light of a high-flying flare first gave us an instant of orientation again. 'Now push on!' said Hitler and we scrambled up the crater wall. Wet through to above the chest our trousers and shirts stuck to our bodies. And how we froze! The envelope and paper we handed the regimental commander were soggy. He was scarcely able to decipher the report.[14]

At 6:45 p.m. the British rose above the breastworks and 'fell in order to storm our position'. As they set out across no-man's-land, Bavarian artillery and machine-gun fire 'struck many down and brought confusion and disorder in their ranks'. Wiedemann described how, just 'as those at the Front were stopped, the storm troops from the second and third waves were coming out of their trenches'.

> Again and again the English tried to construct defensive lines and press forward, in vain, the fire of our infantry and the hail of bullets from our machine guns cleared their ranks... Those who didn't fall shot or smashed to pieces where they had stood, attempted to regain their own trenches. Our fire once again poured into the retreating ranks and brought bloody losses... So the English attack on the sector of the 16th RIR was defeated scarcely before it had been able to develop. No Englishmen entered the trenches of the regiment that day, except as prisoners.[15]

Adolf Meyer had recently been promoted to sergeant and transferred to headquarters, where he was in regular contact with the dispatch runners. His memoir from 1934 is the only one published by a former List Regiment veteran to receive official Nazi sanction, carrying a facsimile handwritten foreword by the notorious Julius Streicher. While Meyer's text tells us little about Hitler, it otherwise represents a dependable, if limited, source. Meyer, who had been heavily committed in the fighting of May 1915, did not enter the trenches and see the carnage of July 1916 until the battle was over, when he was assigned to interrogate prisoners. He was surprised to find a number of German speakers among them; Australia had been a prime destination for German emigrants in the nineteenth century. From John Monash down, thousands of German-born or first-generation German Anzacs served in the Great War. While the Bavarians respected the Australians as doughty fighters, it came as a shock to find men of German blood among them. On the battlefield Meyer met one wounded man, 'who not only spoke excellent German, but bore my own name of Meyer into the bargain. Understandably: His father was a German, who had immigrated to Australia as a child with his parents and had later married an English woman there.' From his interrogations Adolf Meyer was able to form a sympathetic, if misguided, impression of the plight these inexperienced troops found themselves in. 'The English had sent the Australians to attack, to be precise a complete division, honourable soldiers who had come from Egypt and only landed in Le Havre three days earlier.' As was customary, these troops were sent 'over the top' after a tot of rum. This seems the only possible explanation for Meyer's extraordinary claim: 'We were lucky that the majority of them were drunk.'[16]

For the men of the List Regiment this victory at Fromelles 'was a new page of glory'. It showed that the spirit 'of the old all-volunteer regiment, the audacious will to attack and the fresh drive forwards had not been extinguished by the influence of lengthy trench warfare'. So the battle 'brought, in many respects, a welcome relief. Finally to be able once again to fight back and not always to be the targets for English and American shells!'[17]

We know from how Fromelles was feted in the Nazi era how much that night action, followed by the divisional honour parade before the Bavarian crown prince, meant to Hitler and the men of the List Regiment. In the days following the battle, who among them had *not* seen English and Australian corpses piled high on narrow-gauge wagons trundling off in the direction of Fournes for burial? Who had *not* seen the throng of dejected prisoners? In their diversionary thrust, the British had sent their own men into a slaughterhouse and breathed life into a Bavarian division that would soon enough be heading off to the Somme.

So brief was its duration that by the time the first press reports appeared, the battle was over. The first British communiqué simply stated, 'yesterday evening, south of Armentières, we carried out some important raids on a front of two miles, in which Australian troops took part. About 140 German prisoners were captured.' By the following day, a picture was emerging of a successful raid,

from which the attackers withdrew voluntarily after achieving their aims. 'A raid on a large scale was made yesterday by the Australians, in combination with some British troops, in the region of Neuve Chapelle. They broke through into the German trenches on a front of something like 3,000 yards, stayed there for a while and then came away, bringing some 140 prisoners with them.' With the Germans still 'puzzled by the attacks made by the British at Fromelles on Wednesday evening', their first communiqué underestimated their own success. 'The English in considerable force attacked our positions west and north of Fromelles (near Ypres). They were thrown back by our counter-attacks from the points penetrated. We took 300 prisoners.' The next communiqué provided a more accurate summation. 'An English attack in the Fromelles region yesterday by two strong divisions was repulsed. We captured 481 men, and counted 2,000 bodies in front of our lines.'[18]

Meanwhile the first lengthy correspondent's dispatch on the battle, by C.E.W. Bean, was appearing in many British newspapers. In the *Times*, it was carried under the heading 'Anzac Attack Near Armentières – Trenches Flooded by the Germans', and in its Northcliffe stable-mate, the *Daily Mail*, under 'The Huns Surprised Near Armentières – Heavy Losses of Bavarians'. This latter version was translated and reprinted in full, complete with headlines, in the regimental history of 1932, with the comment by Solleder: 'As gloriously as our regiment fought near Fromelles, the representation of this in the English press [was] submerged under the need to raise the mood of their own people and to put the deeds of their fellow country-folk in the best light.' Without turning defeat into victory, Bean made it seem like an honourable draw. Australians retaining a small section of the German line 'were ordered to retire [with] a loss which was slight when the extraordinary difficulty of the operation is considered'.[19]

A week later the first dispatches by German correspondents appeared. With Verdun stalemated and the French on the Somme closing in on Péronne, a clear-cut German success, somewhere, was overdue, especially a Bavarian success. At this time Philip Gibbs was noting of prisoners on the Somme how 'Bavarian soldiers quarreled with the Prussians, accused them (unjustly) of shirking the Somme battle-fields and leaving the Bavarians to go to the blood-bath.' Gibbs may have exaggerated for propaganda effect, but not much. A success by the Bavarians, promoted in north German papers, was long overdue and would go some way towards smoothing ruffled Bavarian feathers. On 30 July, the *Berliner Tageblatt* reported on 'The Bavarian crown prince with the heroes of Fromelles' and described an 'honour parade' in which a Bavarian division 'covered itself in glory and pride'. Two days later the same paper followed up with a lengthy dispatch headed 'The English Were Repulsed – Scenes from the Battle near Fromelles'. The 'English' in question were actually Australians.

> Ah, the Australians were there! Apparently a much stronger garrison than usual – what are they up to then? On the 16th, the English artillery began its dirty work. In the first half of July, the English artillery was

> operating steadily in the Armentières sector, but not doing too much. On 15 July, the enemy let gas loose – and only hurt themselves.[20]

On the late afternoon of 19 July, the attack began. As the British approached, the Bavarians 'shouted themselves hoarse. "Watch out, here they come!"' And so the Australians 'embarked upon their terrible day'. Soon there 'were no more Englishmen standing upright in the trenches'.

> They lay dead in thick piles and beneath them the wounded moaned. Bavarians and Bavarian Swabs had made their reckoning with the enemy...
>
> I do not want to say anything bad about these Australians. Sturdy lads, with gold in all their pockets, unsophisticated, sons of rich graziers and heirs to the land...
>
> [What] their fathers had brought to the wild colony, lay in their bearing and eyes, and they were not to be taken lightly. Good shots, cruel fighters, steel-hard fellows.[21]

Two days later another Berlin paper, the *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, under the heading 'The Battle of Fromelles – From our War Correspondent – W. Scheurmann', reported an 'English' attack which initially met with some success.

> The attackers occupied the first trench on a front of 100 metres and obtained flanking machine-gun fire with which they hoped to block the trenches on the right and extend their front to the left. However, they came up against the Swabian-Bavarians of the Lower Alps.
>
> An hour later they were beaten out again with terrible losses...
>
> On two thirds of the Front, therefore, the matter was over.
>
> The losses of the English were so great that we did not reckon with a repetition of the attack, which proved to be correct.[22]

Scheurmann noted the taunts of Bavarians as 'the English' fled – 'Come on, come on if you've got any pluck' – yet praised the qualities of the adversary. 'The English troops who took part in this action were Australians. For the most part they are war-volunteers and amongst them were many well-to-do farmers, strong youthful men, who undoubtedly attacked with great bravery and proved themselves clever and tenacious in close fighting.'[23]

For Australians Fromelles represented a Western Front rite of passage. By the end of the 1920s, the role of Fromelles in the Australian mythical history of the Great War as an essential element in the Anzac Legend was complete. In post-war Germany the battle also came to be associated with nation-building sentiments, particularly in the Bavarian capital where Fromelles, in which Hitler and the List Regiment were involved, almost matched Verdun (in which they were not) as a mythic-historical concept. In the 1930s postcards were issued, a window in the

Munich town hall (*Rathaus*) was dedicated to the 'Listers' who lost their lives in the war, and a Munich *Sturmabteilung* (SA) unit was granted the right to use '16th' and 'List' in its name. This second battle of Fromelles was appropriately presented as the List Regiment and Adolf Hitler's glory day and deformed, in Munich at least, into one of the great feats of German arms in the Great War.

11

HELL ON THE SOMME

> Those fine qualities which had raised the German race to greatness leapt up once more in a dazzling flame and then slowly went out in a sea of mud and blood.
>
> – Ernst Jünger on the Battle of the Somme[1]

> In a long war with sides very evenly matched like 1861–5 and 1914–18, nothing but slaughter of its men will bring one side to its knees.
>
> – Sir James Edmond (British official historian)[2]

Ernst Jünger's words might almost have been written with the List Regiment in mind. The dazzling flame that had been lit in the minds of the troops by their crushing victory at Fromelles was finally extinguished after eight days of demoralizing, attritional fighting in the mud and blood of the last phase of the Battle of the Somme. It was never relit. Herein lies a certain irony. The victors at Fromelles, the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division, spent the rest of the war sliding further and further down in the rankings of friend and foe alike. On the other hand, the losers soon recovered. In 1918, the 61st South Midland Division was one of the few Fifth Army divisions to hold firm against the crushing weight of Ludendorff's spring offensive. Its partner at Fromelles, the Australian 5th Division, performed brilliantly at Arras, Third Ypres and then in all the fighting around Villers-Bretonneux of 1918. By the war's end it was, arguably, among the top dozen divisions in the British Army.[3]

It is unlikely that Jünger, in a Hannoverian unit, would have heard of the List Regiment during the war. But when Fritz Wiedemann in 1932 wrote of regiments 'dragged along into the darkness and night' of the Battle of the Somme to be 'spewed out in ruins', the List Regiment's former adjutant had his own unit firmly in mind. Neither the List Regiment nor the 6th BRD was prepared for a battle where 'dare-devil enthusiasm' counted for less than the 'soldierly virtue' of being able to 'hold on to the last in lost posts under a barrage of the heaviest calibres'. Wiedemann might have added 'for day after day, night after night', for in the attritional battle of matériel the men of the regiment now found themselves

caught up in what was something new, and alien, to their experience of war. It was, as Hitler himself later described, 'more like Hell than war', yet the 'Hell' that Hitler endured was mild compared with what his comrades had to face *after* he was wounded. Even his first serious wounding of the war could be seen as testament to the 'Lucky Linzers' good fortune. In missing the List Regiment's last five days on the Somme, Hitler endured but a taste of drawn-out, attritional warfare. Until this, to Hitler and his comrades, battle had been a matter of short, sharp and violent engagements, where the attackers, following a brief and even feeble artillery preparation, had surged across fields in waves and had been cut down *en masse*. On all these occasions the killing was followed by a lull during which truces were called and bodies buried. Apart from the radically increased firepower and degree and sophistication of battlefield technology, experience of this kind was but a logical extension of nineteenth-century battle. On the Somme, the regiment encountered modern, or modernist, warfare, for the first time. German units which had fought the more battle-skilled French in 1915 and the first half of 1916 were better prepared than those who, like the List Regiment, had cut their teeth against a BEF in its early learning phase. Yet this alone does not account for its demoralization on the Somme, which was as much due to problems on the Bavarian side as to the work of the British Army.[4]

After July 1916, a buoyant but under-strength 6th BRD was obliged to cool its heels for two more months in the Fromelles sector, facing an Australian 5th Division that was steadily being reinforced, retrained and reinvigorated; a division moreover bent on revenge for the events of 19–20 July. With the Australians full of bravado and eager to prove themselves, live-and-let-live was but a memory; the 6th BRD was losing men as fast as they could be replaced. When the division was transferred to the Somme, it was in the middle of an Indian summer heat wave, through which the men were transported in stiflingly oppressive cattle trucks, and then force-marched in the blazing sun to their battle stations. Just as they entered the trenches the weather broke, heralding the appalling winter of 1916–17. Yet the weather could not be blamed for the demoralization that followed. That was due to the slaughter and sheer confusion created by a breakdown of command that flowed from a regimental commander who was out of his depth and drunk for the duration of the fighting. Even the brave words of the regimental history cannot disguise how the Somme all but destroyed the fighting spirit of the regiment and, in its turn, that of the 6th BRD. At the halfway point in the war, the serious fighting was almost over for both. The 6th BRD 'fought' only one significant battle in 1917 – in the preliminary phase of Third Ypres – and was consigned to support roles in 1918.

In those societies that once comprised the British Empire, the Battle of the Somme – beginning in the heat and dust of high summer and expiring in the freezing glue-like mud of early winter – has come to symbolize Great War frightfulness and incompetent British generalship. It is not necessary to apologize for the worst aspects of Sir Douglas Haig's leadership to suggest that history, sometimes, has been unfair to him. Yet it is still hard for all but the most

dedicated of apologists to accept his claims and those of Sir James Edmonds that the British won an attritional victory on the Somme. Great War casualty figures are notoriously rubbery: given the wide range of massively different choices, no set of figures can any longer be unconditionally trusted. Still, before it became necessary to 'prove' that Allies won the body count on the Somme, official British War Office figures published for the second half of 1916 show *British casualties exceeding those of the Germans facing them by a ratio of 2:1* (481,842 against 236,194). For those who accept these (including the Australian official historian), the British conduct of the battle is blamed for the loss of so many young men from among the best the Empire had to offer. Haig's leadership may have been rigid and his perceptions excessively over-optimistic, but in fairness he was fighting on a battlefield not of his choosing (he would have preferred Flanders) in charge of an army he believed to be not quite ready. As well, the British offensive on the Somme did take pressure off the French at Verdun while putting enough on the Germans to impel their pull-back to the Hindenburg line in early 1917. And while the Germans probably won that *battle* of attrition, they undoubtedly lost the *war* of attrition. Since they were outnumbered and had been fighting ceaselessly since August 1914, in the long run they could ill afford to lose even 60 or 70 per cent of the Allied rate.[5]

After a week-long artillery barrage that was heard in parts of southern England, the 'Big Push' on the Somme began shortly after dawn on 1 July 1916. Such was the apparent intensity of the bombardment that it was expected that the German wire would be cut, their trenches largely obliterated and those few Germans who survived would be too demoralized to put up a fight. So heavy was this barrage that a correspondent for the *Times* thought it was 'as if two score guns at once were pouring their shells into two wretched acres of bare land near a wood'. 'It was difficult not to feel sorry for the Germans.' But appearances were illusionary. As is now known the wire remained largely uncut and the Germans had previously evacuated the exposed open trenches for deep caverns in the Somme limestone, whose existence and significance had been ignored by British planners. Once the barrage lifted, Germans streamed out of the caves and dugouts, reoccupied what remained of their trenches, set up machine guns and mowed down attackers, who, weighed down with heavy packs, trudged relentlessly towards them in waves. No wonder then that the event celebrated in British postcards and souvenirs in 1916 as 'The Glorious First of July' was actually the worst day in the history of the British Army; a day on which 60,000 British soldiers were killed, wounded or missing by nightfall.[6]

Fed by sycophants who told him what he wanted to hear, Haig may have been oblivious to how badly that day had gone; either that, or British GHQ merely revised its expectations downwards. In terms of what had been expected, the attack had failed. But the flow of optimistic communiqués issuing out of British GHQ continued for days. There were those on the British side aware that the overall picture presented by GHQ was inaccurate. Even had the censor been able to pass it, the *Times* correspondent, Colonel Repington, was not the man to write

anything that questioned or contradicted the misinformation appearing in an official communiqué. Yet by the evening of 1 July this astute battlefield observer was aware that all was not going well; that 'only half of our attack had been successful, and the rest of it a very expensive failure'. No hint of this pessimism appeared in either his dispatches or those of his press-corps colleagues, nor was there any public expression by him of his doubts of 3 July. 'Our offensive is not doing quite so well; we are held up by some fortified villages.'[7]

Impressive though the British bombardment seemed, it was actually inferior to that provided by the French in support of their smaller attacking force on the Somme and only half as intense as the British barrage at Arras nine months later. Yet it was inconceivable to British observers that any Germans could survive, which helps explain the ecstatic British reports of those first days. 'Forward in the west – Start of a Great Attack – Fierce Battles on the Somme – A 25 Mile Front – Strong German Posts Taken – 9,500 Prisoners', were the *Times*' headlines for 3 July. 'Our troops have successfully carried out their missions, all counter attacks have been repulsed, and large numbers of prisoners have been taken.' In its leader that day, however, the *Times* expressed caution. Although the 'great offensive in the west' had made a 'good beginning' and promised 'exceedingly well', a prolonged operation could not 'be judged on the results of the first day or two'. On 4 July, however, its Special Correspondent threw caution to the winds: 'It is now possible to get something like an accurate picture of the results of the first day's fighting... both we and the French [have] won complete success.' And since 'an exceptionally large proportion of our casualties are very slight wounds [the] proportion of permanent disabilities will be very small'. In British papers the battle was made out to be a very one-sided affair. 'That brown line... so steady and irresistible was our men', while the 'bands of others running were the enemy'. The Germans were 'never really a match' when it came 'to grips on even terms'. Britain's 'great New Armies' were 'better than we can have dared to hope. Nothing has in any case stopped them except being killed.'[8]

'The English press is radiant', wrote the *Figaro* on 4 July, but by 8 July it was clear to anyone who could read even a distorted newspaper battle map that the smaller French force on the far bank of the Somme had made more progress. 'The progress of our English friends has been perhaps a little slower [than ours]', the *Figaro* observed on 8 July, with the bizarre rider that while 'we have gained prudence and method in this extraordinary war, they have acquired impetuosity and *furia*'. There were disquieting notes beginning to slip into British papers. 'Nobody can tell how much the Boche knew', a wounded Major back from the Front stated. 'If he didn't know when we were timed to move, he made a mighty shrewd guess', and in any case 'his preparations were very complete'. Barely a week later, a senior British statesman was hinting that all had not gone as expected. 'The English advance is necessarily slower than that of the French', Lord Derby told a French interviewer, 'because it has encountered a concentration of enemy forces[!]'.[9]

Germans who still trusted their newspapers could only have been reassured by the news coming from the Somme. On 1 July the German supreme command was

prepared for, in the words of the *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 'a mass attack [and] nothing less'. The British Army had had more than 'time enough' for preparation but to little avail. Although Germany looked forward to 'the future battle with confidence', it would be the 'present hour' that proved 'decisive'. Given British casualties and the paucity of achievement on 1 July, by most reckoning the Germans easily won that decisive day and the battle seemed to continue in their favour for the rest of the week. On 5 July the *Berliner Tageblatt* noted the 'slow development' of the Franco-British offensive, and printed without comment a bizarre French 'explanation' that this was because the 'conditions underfoot' in Picardy were 'particularly unfavourable to the attacker'. In this dry summer, did the French believe that the ground could have been better?[10]

German attitudes to the soldiers of the British Army had changed radically since the early days of 1914. The respected troops of the professional army of Mons and Le Cateau had been all but wiped out at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge and Loos. The all-volunteer *citizen* armies now facing them on the British sector of the Somme were an unknown factor, but since these had been raised quickly without benefit of the peacetime training experienced by many Germans and most Frenchmen, the Germans were sceptical of their worth and inclined to be dismissive. While these new British forces 'doubtless' included many 'brave men', they also included some 'quite unmilitary elements', ensuring that any attempt 'to overthrow a German Army hardened by two years of war' with troops assembled 'under all possible difficulties' would prove futile. Making the task facing these raw soldiers all the harder, the British now knew that 'the German lines were quite differently prepared than those which they hoped awaited them. These positions were constructed with diligence and all thoroughness.' With the battle-hardened Germans cutting swathes through the New Army divisions, George Querl, a correspondent for the *Berliner Tageblatt*, used English admissions to highlight growing concern in the British Empire for soaring British losses.

> The latest English reports stress in an unfamiliar manner English losses in the undertaking on the Ancre [Somme tributary]. The Northcliffe press has provided the key word and a number of the kingdom's news-sheets are following its example. With dry objectivity the sacrifice is described as too great. Scarcely a word of special sympathy is offered.[11]

Querl was not exaggerating. Lord Northcliffe, whose war cry 'Trust The Soldiers!' had summed up an anti-democratic attitude by which war-making was left to generals (in the belief that meddlesome politicians only impeded their task), was now, perhaps, beginning to have second thoughts. Less than two weeks into the battle, there was plain good sense in another slogan later attributed to Northcliffe: 'No More Sommes.'[12]

Nine days after the Allies had launched their joint offensive the professed aims and intentions had been discarded. By 10 July the Battle of the Somme resembled a fight to the death between two evenly matched sides, in which the one that still

had one survivor standing, unopposed, at some distant point of time amidst the piles of dead became the winner. The Somme, in the words of Sir James Edmonds 12 years after the event, was 'not a battle that can be measured by gain or loss of ground, but only by its effect on the German Army, and the losses inflicted on it which broke its morale'. The idea that it had been 'a struggle for bits of ground [was] a totally wrong view. When two adversaries are evenly matched, victory can only be decided by wearing down.' Such attritional thinking was deemed justifiable, provided the enemy was doing most of the dying. Unfortunately for the British this was not so and the vague breakthrough strategy of 1 July was never totally discarded – just the over-ambitious aims. On 10 July the British tried once more not merely to kill Germans but to break their line, and once more without success. In a dispatch of the 13th, Querl announced that the 'new English offensive, which began on Monday [10 July] after a fiery artillery onslaught, came to a full stop yesterday'.

> The sole result proved to be the capture of Contalmaison. It is scarcely conceivable that this gigantic employment of strength was unable to enjoy any greater success than this modest achievement; but in spite of all these discouraging losses the English have again begun a bombardment, and it is reasonable to expect that they will quickly re-group in great strength and throw new things at us.[13]

The 'new things' took the form of predictable narrow-fronted attacks the following day, which just as predictably failed to lead 'to the breakthrough for which General Haig hoped' and resulted in 'slow progress at great cost'. British correspondents were still obliged to write what A.J. Cummings called 'the endless drivel dispatched to British newspapers by the corps of war correspondents attached to G.H.Q.'; material designed 'to cheer the spirits of the troops at the Front and to stimulate the morale of the civilians at home'. One or two brave souls tried to sneak more realistic material past their censors; Philip Gibbs, a correspondent credited by most of his peers with being (at least) 'sensitive to the truth', admitted that the 'advance' was causing 'us very hard fighting for the important positions on the high ground'. But then this had to be weighed against 'the fact' (allegedly revealed by German prisoners) that grave anxiety was 'reigning behind the German lines'. British correspondents were now switching to a *selectively* attritional theme, as though the aim of the battle all along had been to kill Germans while losing the bare minimum of British troops. In support of this fantasy, a British 'senior officer who was wounded at Bazentin' was quoted as saying:

> The British had a good many casualties, but *it was not the number, but the fewness which impressed me* [emphasis added]. Our new armies can stand a lot more than the Germans. It is now a matter of relative gains and losses. *If the British casualties were ten times as they are the war*

> *would be over at the end of the summer* [emphasis added], and Germany would be down and out.[14]

Meanwhile in the Flanders backwater, on days or nights when little was happening in their sector, the men of the List Regiment could clearly hear the big guns and even feel the ground tremble under their feet from barrages 70 miles south in Picardy. Their newspapers were carrying the usual assortment of Allied 'lies', 'balanced' by more 'objective' German counter-claims. But even the most optimistic and reassuring communiqués and dispatches could do little but describe the Battle of the Somme as a savage, no-holds-barred affair involving a million men, which might yet exceed Verdun in murderous potential. By mid-July, battered regiments that had been on the Somme began taking up positions, recuperating in the nursery sector. As the men from these units saw it, every unit in the German armies would have their turn in the cauldron and it is only a question of time before the List Regiment faced the prospect. Much as this appealed to fanatics like Hitler, run-of-the-mill soldiers, hearing the horror tales of Somme veterans, must have hoped that the battle would somehow end before the services of the List Regiment were needed. But given the unwillingness of the Germans (even under the most extreme duress) to give up ground and the stubborn dedication with which the British and French launched costly attack after attack against heavily fortified positions, the likelihood of either side giving way seemed remote. Even before the Anglo-Australian assault at Fromelles on 19–20 July 1916, rumours were abounding that the List Regiment's turn was coming in the none-too-distant future. In late September the 6th BRD bade a final farewell to its old home, most men leaving, as Meyer (who had recently been promoted to lieutenant) recalled, with a 'wistful feeling'.

> What we had all experienced here! Memories attached to every patch of earth, each stretch of trench and every destroyed house. How often we were taken from Fournes to the trenches at Fromelles! On our return gaps were present in the ranks on every occasion, every time true comrades had been killed or wounded... I can still see the long rows of brown hillocks. Under these, rest true comrades... many Germans among the Englishmen, Indians and Australians. All gave their best, their strength and their youth, all brought their greatest sacrifice, themselves.[15]

Although its losses were light compared with those of the British and Australians at Fromelles, the 6th BRD was still under-strength in September 1916. This strength was further sapped when it was made into a three-regiment division, with the 20th RIR being temporarily transferred to serve with a Prussian division. The List Regiment, as part of the 6th BRD, left the nursery sector on 24–25 September 1916, relieved by men from what remained of a Bavarian regiment coming out of a particularly arduous tour of duty on the Somme. 'As the officers and men were under the fresh impression that the great fighting days

[on the Somme] had left on them, their stories strengthened the impression that something completely out of the ordinary awaited us.' At the same time, also awaiting transfer to the Somme was the Australian 5th Division; indeed units from this division briefly squared off against elements of the 6th BRD on the Somme, in fighting near the Butte de Warlancourt in early October.[16]

Before leaving for the Somme, the regiment was granted a few days rest in quarters 'far from the Front'; the first such break since before the battle of Neuve Chapelle 16 months before. 'For many brave infantrymen, this was the last time that they would ever be able to rest and relax a little!' They entrained from Haubourdin during the night of 26–27 September and went into reserve in front of Bapaume a few days later, finally entering the Somme battle on 2–3 October, in the sector Le Barque-Bapaume. They had known mud and grim conditions in Flanders, but – as though by a kind of gentlemen's agreement – the fight against the elements had usually been carried on independently of the real war, for which both sides waited on more favourable weather. On the Somme the weather and war waited for no man. The mud was beyond the Listers' experience; not so much mud it seems, but a blue-grey glutinous sludge that sucked men down to their knees and demanded minutes of exhausting labour for just a few yards' progress. And in all this the bombardment from shell and mortar fire, from grenades and small-arms fire, was unceasing. As though the constant autumn rain, the glutinous sludge and the active ever-constant struggle for survival in a never-ceasing battle of matériel were not enough, the regiment was obliged to fight on, day after day, night after night, in a state that might appropriately be described as leaderless.

> For the 16th RIR, the battle of the Somme was no action in which clear and unequivocal orders were sent to the lines. On the contrary it consisted of a shattering muddle, evoked through orders, countermanded orders and contradictory reports. It consisted of little and infrequent contact between companies, battalions and the regiment, the battle rather disintegrating into individual actions, which one sought, in so far as possible, subsequently to coordinate.[17]

Writing in 1932, Fritz Wiedemann was in no position to cast blame for this 'shattering muddle', since the man responsible was one of his co-authors in the regimental history. Instead, Wiedemann chose to praise 'the clear and unequivocal will of the company commanders, who still had a few men with them prepared to put into service machine-guns lying forsaken in shell-holes', men who still possessed 'the will to die rather than let the enemy through'.[18]

His choice of 'a few' [*einige*], however, hints at the existence of a number, probably a majority, of disillusioned men prepared to do no more than the minimum demanded of them; men already exhibiting signs of battle fatigue. By 1961 Wiedemann was prepared, if not to name names, at least to allocate blame for the demoralization of his regiment. 'During the Somme battle', he wrote, 'the

successor to our old commander Colonel Petz became so stupefied that he was unable to function... This man, whose name I'd prefer not to mention here, became so drunk that he was unable to sign the orders I'd drafted for him.' The regimental history reveals that this drunken, incompetent officer was Lieutenant-Colonel Emil Spatny, who served as regimental commander between March 1916 and April 1917. A regular officer, Spatny had never risen above the rank of captain in peacetime. War saw his rapid promotion, but it 'was nothing more than a wartime stopgap, that allowed a regiment to be entrusted to a man who in peacetime had not even commanded a battalion'. Spatny finally was allowed 'to go home' without a blemish on his copybook. Wiedemann wondered whether 'a non-commissioned officer or serving soldier, whose complete drunkenness demonstrated unfitness for war service, would have been similarly dealt with'.[19]

In 1932, Wiedemann was still trying to make sense and order out of the chaos surrounding the List Regiment's 10 days on the Somme in October 1916. Casualties he could account for. 'Regimental losses in the 10 days of action on the Somme amounted to seven officers and 243 NCOs and men killed, 17 officers and 827 NCOs and men wounded, as well as two officers and 88 men missing, who can certainly be counted as killed, making an average loss of 118 men per day.' Otherwise this thorough military historian had to make do with the observation that it was no longer 'necessary' to know 'which company advanced at what point in time against the enemy, which squad at the beginning of the enemy attack hurried in a drive to the Front, in order to close at the last moment a breach in the line caused by enemy fire. It suffices to know that, on the Somme, the endurance of those in the companies was stretched to the limit, to the point where psychological and physical strength was completely exhausted.' Wiedemann barely bothered to disguise the demoralization that ensued.

> In some companies a quarter to one third of the men suffered severely from dysentery, exacerbated by cold food, inclement weather and the lack of dry bunks. The continual lack of rest at night became exhausting; the constant artillery fire wore down the nerves. The companies needed relief urgently [but] requests sent by the regiment to the brigade were denied; if the men would only hold out for a short time, the division would surely be relieved soon. The man in the trenches began to hope of relief the following night, the more he summoned strength for this, the greater he fell [victim] to disappointment when he saw himself deceived in his expectations. After this occurrence was repeated two or three times, a destructive sense of abandonment began to take hold. Otherwise peaceful and rational men became irrational, and started to air this mood in reports and requests.[20]

In these circumstances, 'despair dug deep furrows in their faces and also crept into the hearts of brave men. Daily they saw comrades dying to the left and right of them, they stumbled over their bodies in the fighting and could count on the

fingers of two hands how many days would be needed until the last man in the company would be devoured by the battle and death.'[21]

Hitler and Brandmayer entered the cauldron along with the rest of the regiment on 2 October. For dispatch runners who had come to know the trenches and hot spots around Fromelles like the back of their hands this unfamiliar landscape was disconcerting and immensely threatening. The confusion that marked the List Regiment's Somme passage was already beginning; a confusion which only made the dispatch runner's role more vital and his task more arduous. Rain pelted down ceaselessly as they struggled 'madly from battalion to battalion, hurrying hour after hour through a devastated crater field, orders and counter-orders crossed one another; some companies could not be found'. Brandmayer described:

> Dead and buried everywhere. – We fell from shell hole to shell hole. Multicoloured flares arched heavenwards and burst into countless streams. This was always the moment after which we leapt for another freshly turned-up crater in which to disappear... Shrapnel, filth and iron rained mercilessly down on us. The blood almost stagnated in my arteries... it could only be a few seconds longer – then, yes, then an armoured-steel force ripped at bodies already scratched and torn... My nerve failed. I just wanted to lie where I was, I sank hopelessly into an insupportable apathy. – Then Hitler spoke kindly to me, gave me words of encouragement, said that someday all our heroism would be rewarded a thousand fold in the Fatherland... We returned... uninjured. Our faces were no longer recognizable.[22]

With the chain of command broken, it was inevitable that the chaos over the ensuing days must increase. The confusion over orders meant that teams of dispatch runners were now going out, often in search of the same company or battalion, but carrying with them conflicting orders that demanded further clarification and an ever-increasing number of sorties by the exhausted dispatch runners. And so dangerous had their field of operations become that at one stage not two but six dispatch runners were sent out, all carrying the same order, in the hope that at least one might arrive at his destination. In Brandmayer's words, the 'arena in the west no longer concerned the waging of war, but the inhuman extermination of a young generation'. Halfway through what would become the regiment's endurance test on the Somme, none of the dispatch runners 'had closed our eyes in five days'. The regiment was now at breaking point.

> We were fortified with strong brandy from the provisions depot. With this, we were meant to ignore the atrocities of war. From hour to hour our courage and strength sank increasingly. After a week we already imagined ourselves to be living in the burning and bottomless pit of hell. And then came 7 October. The troops demanded more loudly and vehemently to be relieved. On the average the companies counted no more than

> 80 men. There'd been no hot food for eight days. Dysentery was taking on the form of an epidemic.[23]

By now the dispatch runners were falling like flies. Bachmann lay 'heavily wounded in a casualty clearing centre [and] great was the joy when one of the others was seen again, healthy and unhurt'. A measure of the increasing demoralization had been plain for all to see as early as 5 October. Wiedemann, as regimental adjutant, had asked for volunteers and where once, not long ago, he might have been swamped by men stepping forward, now 'nobody dared to poke his head above a shell-hole unnecessarily, let alone voluntarily put his life at risk'.

> Then Hitler stepped forward, as had happened so often in the past. The tireless Hitler and Schmied set out for the second time – Schmied came back alone. We were all deeply shaken when we heard that Hitler had been wounded... He lay out at the Front wallowing in his own blood, shot through the left leg... Stretcher-bearers carried him back.[24]

What had happened? Hitler himself simply states 'I was wounded' and puts the date at 7 October 1916, two days later than that cited by Maser. Neither Brandmayer nor Wiedemann were eyewitnesses, but Wiedemann, as regimental adjutant, was in a sound position to report on what had happened to the corporal who had become 'my dispatch runner'. Accompanied by Schmidt, Hitler had reached a dugout occupied by other dispatch runners when a stray shell of light calibre exploded close by. All were wounded, even Schmidt, who did, however, manage to reach the regimental position unaided. Wiedemann sought him out as soon as the stretcher-bearers brought Hitler in. His wound in the left thigh proved not to be serious, and as Wiedemann bent over him to inspect, he quotes Hitler as saying:

> 'It is not so bad, captain, right? I'll stay with you, stay with the regiment!' There he lay, the man who so badly wanted to be an artist, who loved all newspapers, who philosophized about political and ideological questions in the primitive manner of ordinary people. There he lay, wounded, and had no other wish than to be allowed to stay with his regiment. He had no family and also, if one might say, no homeland. For Corporal Hitler the List Regiment was home.[25]

Hitler was evacuated and entered a Red Cross hospital at Beelitz near Berlin on 9 October, suggesting that 5 October is the more likely date of his wounding. Either way, he thus missed out on the regiment's worst days on the Somme. For Balthaser Brandmayer, however, the Somme experience dragged on for about another week; a week which, from his and Wiedemann's descriptions, must have seemed like an eternity to the men trapped by it.

> In the night of 12/13 October the regiment was pulled out of the line. The feeling that we had been abandoned overwhelmed us in the last days and despair dug deep furrows in the faces of incomparable heroes. Corpses lay in piles on the battlefield, nobody was able to bury them, so we stumbled about over the bodies of our own dead comrades and rejoiced that the beast of war had not devoured us.[26]

Before being repatriated to Germany, Hitler was taken to a field hospital at nearby Hermies. Here, for the first time in two years, he 'almost collapsed for fright' on hearing 'the voice of a German woman serving as a nurse'. A day or so later he was on his way back to Germany. His joy at the sight of the 'first German house', recognizable by its 'high gable and beautiful shutters', was irresistible. 'The Fatherland!' The hospital at Beelitz also seems to have overwhelmed him. 'From the mud of the Battle of the Somme into the white beds of this miraculous building! In the beginning we hardly dared to lie in them properly. Only gradually could we re-accustom ourselves to this New World. Unfortunately, this world was new in another respect as well.' Had he been able to remain on the Somme with his regiment for those last, terrible, demoralizing days, and been witness to the mutinous mood that was developing, the defeatism (spread by a few rotten apples, or 'scoundrels') and the 'cowardice' he found at Beelitz might have been less surprising. Finally, when at last he could walk, he 'obtained permission to go to Berlin'.

> Clearly there was dire misery everywhere. The big city was suffering from hunger. Discontent was great. In various soldiers' homes the tone was like that in the hospital. It gave you the impression that these scoundrels were intentionally frequenting such places in order to spread their views. But much, much worse were conditions in Munich itself![27]

As soon as he was considered cured, Hitler had been transferred to a replacement battalion in the German city of his prewar dreams. Munich was no longer recognizable. 'Anger, discontent, cursing wherever you went.' In the replacement battalion itself, 'the general mood was miserable; to be a slacker passed almost as a sign of higher wisdom, while loyal steadfastness was considered a symptom of inner weakness and narrow-mindedness'. In the city itself:

> The offices were filled with Jews. Nearly every clerk was a Jew and nearly every Jew was a clerk. I was amazed at this plethora of warriors of the chosen people and could not help but compare them with their rare representatives at the Front. As regards economic life, things were even worse. Here the Jewish people had become really 'indispensable.' The spider was slowly beginning to suck the blood out of the peoples' pores.[28]

If this is what Hitler saw, or believed he saw, then it must count as his second anti-Semitic 'conversion', after that of Vienna almost a decade earlier. It is hard to believe that Hitler was not a confirmed anti-Semite in Munich in late 1916, but harder to believe that this Bavarian city, with its relatively minor Jewish population, could be infested with Jewish slackers and Hitler's bizarre blood-sucking arachnids. Perhaps he was seeing what he wanted to see. Eight years after the event, he was almost certainly exaggerating for political effect. In late 1916 as well, it was known that an enquiry was being conducted into 'the number of Jews at the Front and in the rear'. This was to be followed by an 'investigation by the Reichstag into the numbers of Jews employed in the offices and agencies of the war economy'. Since the Jews were more than pulling their weight, nothing could come of this. But merely holding these enquiries were in themselves damaging enough, particularly for so susceptible an anti-Semite as Adolf Hitler.[29]

At about the time he was 'noticing' the prevalence of Jews in cushy jobs throughout Munich, Hitler was also writing to his comrade Brandmayer at the List Regiment. If Hitler was really concerned about what he was seeing, no hint of this emerges from his communication with his old friend, which concentrates rather on the state of his teeth.

> Dear Partner!
> How are you going? I am thinking of all of you as I sit with swollen cheeks between my four walls. A few days ago I saw Schmid. A transport will be leaving in a few days for the regiment. Can't go, sorry... Suffer from hunger fever as I can't chew bread, besides they're stubbornly refusing me that jam. I'm so hungry. And so how's it going with you? Please write! Heartfelt Greetings.[30]

Hitler's expectation that he would be back with friends and comrades in the only real home he knew was soon to be dashed. Yes, he would be returning to the Front, but no – not to the List Regiment. Reinforcements of his obvious calibre and experience were no longer to be wasted in second-line reserve divisions. Hitler was destined for a regiment of an élite Bavarian regular division. It was an honour that he neither sought nor wanted. In January 1917 he wrote to Wiedemann in the following terms:

> Captain Fritz Wiedemann, adjutant 16. Bav. R.I.R.
> After a long residence in a military hospital I have for some weeks been in Munich with the reinforcement battalion of the 2nd Infantry Regiment. I am again fit for field service and, as I have heard, will shortly be posted by reinforcement transport for active service with the 2nd Infantry Regiment. My captain will understand that it is my pressing wish to be with my old regiment and old comrades. I ask that my captain request that I return to the 16. R.I.R.[31]

Wiedemann willingly acceded to the request. 'When Hitler arrived again at the regiment early in 1917 both sides were happy: he was back "home" and we had our proven dispatch runner.'[32]

While Hitler was still recuperating, the Battle of the Somme was wound down and finally abandoned, but not before the long-awaited German reinforcements, freed now by the cessation of serious fighting at Verdun, had begun taking up positions along the Somme battle front. In this battle the List Regiment and 6th BRD had been tested almost beyond the limits of endurance, but in spite of it all had forced the enemy to fight for every metre ceded. Thus, the regiment's part in the battle alongside the 17th RIR became the subject of noteworthy praise in the Bavarian official history. This records that the weather for the division's first day in the line was foggy and the conditions relatively peaceful. And then, in the early hours of 1 October, the British began a series of attacks, which culminated in the big offensive of 7 October.

> In broad, thick and deep formations the enemy lift themselves out of their trenches. After a few seconds the annihilating German defensive fire seizes them. Those who seek to continue the offensive are caught up in German rifle and machine-gun fire. The attack is repulsed… However the barrier which was immediately constructed in this area, showed itself in the following days to be unshakable. And it was so with the night attacks [which] were wrecked by the steadfastness of the 17th RIR and 16th RIR.
>
> From the Frontline, the cries for relief resound ever more urgently in the following days. The company strength has sunk to 35, sometimes 15 men. On 12 October [the] 16th RIR has but 350 riflemen. And on exactly this day, the English launch a mass attack in the grandest style. Scotsmen and Englishmen storm in thick swarms and bunched columns, encouraged by officers on horses. But they don't win a foot of ground. Despite their numerical weakness, the troops of the 6th BRD again hold firm that to which they have been entrusted. In this proud realization they can depart from their position in the following nights, relieved by the 40th Infantry Division.[33]

12

DECLINING FORTUNE

The division Hitler pulled strings to rejoin was, by early 1917, in serious decline. As had happened in the case of the Australian 5th and British 61st divisions, the 6th BRD might have been reconstructed and brought back to something approaching battle strength. But OHL chose otherwise. Making matters worse, the relatively mediocre 20th RIR returned to the division after the Somme, while the excellent 21st RIR was shipped out to join one of the few high-quality divisions serving on the Eastern Front. Now comprising three regiments, the 6th BRD was also being stripped of its better, more experienced, soldiers. Wounded Iron Cross holders such as Bachmann and Hitler were transferred, after recuperation, to units evidently deemed more in need of quality reinforcements, with Hitler being one of the few to reject his 'promotion'. It is significant of the low esteem in which the division was regarded that a drunken incompetent was left in charge of the List Regiment, and only relieved (honourably) of his duties prior to the Battle of Arras in April 1917.

The 6th BRD had been tried, but failed to distinguish itself in offensive actions. In defence, however, it had carved out a fine reputation. Quality *Stellunsgsdivisionen* would be much needed in 1917, since the Germans knew well in advance what the Allies were planning. Secrecy regarding the coming April–May offensives on the Aisne and at Arras was as good as non-existent, while Haig's late-summer Flanders offensive – telegraphed by the two-month prior attack on Messines – had long been the subject of (accurate) speculation in German newspapers. Meanwhile, the 6th BRD had been holding a sleepy if freezing sector on the heights at Vimy, only to be withdrawn before the successful Canadian assault on Vimy Ridge in April 1917. After Vimy, the division was sent meandering through quiet sectors. It finally took up a position in the trenches near Gheluvelt for what Allied intelligence described as its 'only important fight' of 1917. 'Fight' is hardly the *mot juste*. The 6th BRD 'suffered heavily' while barely laying eyes on an Englishman, being blasted to pieces and gassed in the two-week artillery prelude to the 31 July offensive that launched Third Ypres. Even so, of the 3,754 men of the regiment who were killed or died in the four years of war, only 478, or 13 per cent, fell during 1917, just 50 per cent more than fell in

10 days on the Somme in 1916. Eighty-six German divisions took part in Third Ypres, but the 6th BRD was only briefly one of them, and then not during the serious fighting. Instead it spent most of autumn 1917 pleasantly ensconced in a dormant sector of what was then German Alsace; a region so quiet that it was normally the domain of third- and fourth-class 'Landwehr' or 'Landsturm' divisions, which consisted mainly of under-aged, over-aged, recalcitrant or half-fit men.[1]

A battle-hardened and resolute 6th BRD, in which some of the all-volunteer spirit of 1914 remained, would have been invaluable to Rupprecht's Sixth Army as the war entered its third year. When Ludendorff assumed effective Western Front command in autumn 1916, 152 Germans faced 190 Allied divisions; 2,500,000 Germans against 3,900,000 Allied troops. To minimize his manpower disadvantage and eliminate a dangerous salient, in the autumn and winter of 1916–17, Ludendorff drew back on the Somme and Pas-de-Calais to the Hindenburg-line defences (*Siegfriedstellung*), a move read by the Allied press as a 'German defeat, our victory of the Somme'. But no one could honestly claim victory from that bloodbath. The Germans sought to present it as an attritional victory, but their subsequent withdrawal was not easily explained to a German public eager for advances and clear-cut victories. With the Germans outnumbered by 50 per cent on the Western Front, ruthless decisions had to be made. First-class units were brought back to strength as quickly as possible, even if this meant a snail's-pace replacement of losses in units deemed of lesser calibre. A slow influx of replacements, many of indifferent quality, only part tells the story of the List Regiment's fall from grace. As noted, the incompetent Spatny was left in command until April 1917, six months after his breakdown and coinciding with the return of Corporal Hitler to the regiment. Spatny's successor, Major Anton von Tubeuf, was a man, in Wiedemann's words, 'of different mettle. A young, active major, he was delighted to be able to command a regiment.'[2]

On his return to the Front, Hitler found his comrades occupying trenches in a quiet sector on the heights of Vimy. During his absence it had been involved in little fighting, but had endured climatic conditions, on a wind-swept position in that most terrible winter of the war, which were harsher than any the men had known. Hitler, by missing the worst of these months, was living up to his 'Lucky Linzer' nickname. Lieutenant Adolf Meyer was not so fortunate. Until 9 February when he was relieved, Meyer, in charge of an observation post, spent 'Three and a half months without relief, three and a half months in the same clothes, three and a half months without seeing a civilian.' When food arrived, cold and barely edible, rats had already consumed a 'considerable portion'. Never had he 'encountered such a plague as here. Each night they nibbled new holes through the trench frameworks, to walk undisturbed above the sleepers. Bread hanging from the dugout beams was never safe from their gluttony.'[3]

With almost blizzard conditions prevailing, the dispatch runners spent much of their time huddled together, 'in a feebly lit dugout arguing about the Front and the homeland'. Hitler was embittered after his experiences in Germany. To

anyone prepared to listen, he would spew out his hatred for the (Jewish) Social Democrats and Marxists he regarded as blameworthy for munitions strikes in Germany. If he could 'only be war minister for a day', he roared, 'within 24 hours the criminals would be put up against the wall'. It was 'an enormous betrayal of the country to incite the masses to a munitions strike, so that we would be left defenceless before the enemy to bleed to death'. Brandmayer felt that Hitler was 'never better received than at that time in the trenches'. Apart from the occasional argument and the kind of skylarking in which Hitler was never known to take part and the obligatory 'ratting and lousing', there was little to occupy their time: the men faced as much danger from disease-carrying rodents as from the (then) peacefully inclined Canadian First Division opposite.

> In the evening [Brandmayer] cooked Hitler's favourite meal, potato-dumplings, tea and jam. Just as I had gone to sleep, Hitler would start rushing back and forth around the dugout hunting voracious rats... And he allowed no one a moment's peace until a boot was thrown at his head... Then silence ruled. – And as the new day dawned, Hitler set out on his duties fearlessly and unflinchingly.[4]

Although the Germans still held the heights, as the weather cleared, the call on the dispatch runners began to increase. Even in this quiet, but exposed, position, they needed to have their wits about them, as Meyer discovered when he was ordered to convey a confidential dispatch to two battalions in the front-line trenches. Meyer needed a guide and the regimental sergeant major, Max Amman, obliged, by giving him 'the dispatch runner Corporal Hitler'. While dispatch runners were accustomed to dealing with 'the heaviest enemy fire in open country, during my long years in the trenches such an encounter would be new to me'. The two men set off and for a short distance remained under cover.

> Soon we had to leave this behind and make our way across open ground. The track led us past two [enemy] forward field guns. Scarcely had we entered the vicinity, when the enemy welcomed us with murderous fire. We realized immediately that we could be observed... Had I been on my own, without thinking I would have made for deep cover... My companion was of another mind. Without the slightest hesitation he sought, while taking every possible advantage of cover, to get out of that witches' kettle quickly. Naturally [I] had to follow. And it was just as well. Both of us came out unwounded from the danger zone. Two hours passed while we visited the two battalions. We set out on our return journey.
>
> Scarcely had we arrived in the vicinity of the two guns when the enemy began employing his magic afresh. Understandably we did not stop this time and, unhurt but covered in sweat, we reached safety...

> The dispatch runner Hitler was assigned to accompany me on several more occasions, and every time we came out unharmed.[5]

After an uneventful five months in the Arras–Vimy sector, the regiment was relieved. It was hence spared the bitter fighting of the Battle of Arras. While in reserve at Douai, at 5 a.m. on 28 April alarms sounded, the division marched into a position behind the so-called Wotan Stellung, and spent 24 hours either standing in ranks or marching up to 30 kilometres 'in full battle readiness'. 'Finally on 30 April', wrote Tubeuf, 'it went to the district bivouac at Corbeham and early the following morning returned to Douai'.[6]

In the East, the most momentous event in the most momentous year of the war was taking place. At first Allied propagandists called the first Russian revolution of 1917 'purely and simply anti-German', interpreting this as a 'crushing blow for Germany' and 'proof' that the Russian people – against the inclination of a decadent and Germanophile Tsarist regime – had chosen to honour Russia's obligations to the Entente. This was wishful thinking. Although it took a second, Bolshevik, revolution to force Russia out of the war, the demoralization and ineffectiveness of Russia's armies was evident by late 1916. Should Russia sue for a separate peace, then its partners on the Western Front faced the prospect of being outnumbered by the end of 1917. Decades later, Lord Beaverbrook summed up the situation.

> The year 1917 opened up in disaster for Britain. Germany was the military master of Europe. The French nation was exhausted. Russia was staggering to her doom. The British people were dispirited and a food shortage threatened the very existence of the nation...
>
> The public at large were certainly not aware of the dreadful danger, and even important Ministers were incapable of grasping the terrible truth.[7]

In the West, the situation demanded that the Allies exploit any superiority in manpower and *matériel* while they enjoyed it. After 6 April 1917 the United States was in the war, but was not expected to make a meaningful contribution until 1918. This could be too late. Russia's defection freed almost 100 German divisions for the West. Yet the new British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George (who replaced Asquith in December 1916), wanted no part of Haig's attritional schemes. With the need for a decisive breakthrough in 1917 more pressing than ever, the search began for a general with ideas that offered alternatives to Somme thinking. Lloyd George was sure he had found his man in French general Robert Nivelle, who replaced Joffre as French commander-in-chief in the month Lloyd George assumed British prime-ministership.

Nivelle was multilingual and considered 'a very intelligent man'. His military peers were less impressed, but politicians appreciated his ability to explain battle plans 'with perfect clarity' and his willingness to share 'with his subordinates the honour of victory'. Lloyd George was not the only statesman seduced by Nivelle.

'All the politicians of all political parties of whom he received a visit' came away 'with the same impression'. In early 1917, Nivelle was able to offer a plan based on his success at Verdun, which depended on a creeping artillery barrage, backed by a rapid-moving, massed infantry attack. Nivelle proposed a joint attack; the French would attack in the southern Aisne sector on the Chemin des Dames, while the British staged diversionary offensives near Arras, against the ridge at Vimy and at nearby Bullecourt. After a maximum of 48 hours Nivelle envisaged ripping through the Aisne front in depth, while simultaneously mounted lateral attacks behind the enemy lines destroyed the German batteries and cut off their supply lines. Large reserve units would be then thrown into the yawning gap, where they would be free to operate in strength in a situation of open warfare. Haig promptly dismissed this plan as absurd, but Lloyd George, to Haig's chagrin, unfavourably compared 'the successes obtained by the French and ourselves', insisting that the French had obtained theirs 'at a cost in human life smaller than ours'. The French generals Foch, Pétain and Nivelle's predecessor, Joffre, supported Haig's criticisms of Nivelle, and some of this concern affected French president Painlevé. Too late, for the plan went ahead.[8]

Haig, with no choice but to support Nivelle, launched the Battle of Arras on 9 April 1917, a week before Nivelle began his offensive. German correspondents, aware of what was coming, boasted that the Arras offensive would confirm Hindenburg's masterly generalship as being as dominant on the battlefield in the West as it was in the East. 'He anticipated the offensive [and] our brave troops who have to stand the first shock know that, whatever the coming days may bring, they are being led safely and deliberately along the road which ends in victory.' German propaganda now sought to turn serious deficiencies in *matériel* and a temporary inferiority in manpower into a moral advantage. As British correspondents had written in 1914–15, so did the Germans in 1917. Once more the machine was the last resort of a coward who, aware of his own inadequacies in the face of superior morale and infallible generalship, sought to crush the armies of his enemy under a mass of steel and explosives.

> The Battle of Arras is the beginning of the decisive fight between the brainless piling up of material and the living genius who inspires his tools with his will and employs them according to his laws. [It] is possible for the Entente, by increasing its material expenditure, to broaden the effect of its attack and to raise to a higher pitch the horror that this process of development has given modern battle. That cannot frighten us. We have confidence in our supreme leader – confidence that his fine art will be equal to the most difficult situations and will ruin the plans of his enemies.[9]

The principal British achievement of the first days of Arras was the capture of Vimy Ridge. 'Never was there a more brilliant and successful day in the history of the British Army', wrote Repington for the *Times*. 'By yesterday afternoon on

a 12-mile front near Arras our line had been advanced 3,000 yards, and Canadian troops had gone over the crest of the ridge.' The Germans excused the loss as being 'directly part of the plan of the German Army Command[!]'. In any case, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* added, 'the battle-fortune of the Marshal is not bound up with the possession of a hill', Hindenburg having 'resolved, in order to save useless sacrifice, to withdraw from that part of the Front'. The British were already claiming that the Germans were on their last legs. 'I have heard our soldiers talk of the prisoners coming "to eat out of their hands"', wrote the *Times* Special Correspondent. Even so, in later fighting on 'the north end of the Vimy Ridge, the Germans seem to have counter-attacked with determination and fought well'.[10]

By late April most of the heavy fighting was taking place not near Arras or Vimy, but in a murderous attritional fight at the southernmost end of the British front by Bullecourt, which had been designed to draw German reserves away from the Arras–Vimy sector. By early May 1917, with British gains measurable in yards and nothing else in it except pride for either side, it was the time, surely, to wind down the Battle of Arras. However, by now the BEF was fighting to draw German attention away from their French Ally. For the first time in the war, the armies of the British Empire had become Germany's principal Western Front *fighting* enemy. The Nivelle offensive had ensured this would be so.

On 16 April 1917, the day Nivelle opened his offensive, the *Kölnische Zeitung* led with an article clearly designed as a spur to German soldiers engaged around Arras. The idea that Germany, as the saviour of Europe, was fighting for European civilization was recycled less than 25 years later as a cornerstone for the Nazi vision of a new European order.

> By our victory, we are fighting for the peace of Europe. That is why the following war aim must, in our opinion, not be forgotten: – England must get out of Calais, get out of Ionian Isles, of Crete and Cyprus, and be removed from her observation post before the Dardanelles [and] Malta and Gibraltar... England is the enemy not only of Germany but also of Europe. The Entente will not last forever. But precisely because Europe must be freed from the English yoke, we Germans... should not forget this aim, which in the interest of Europe and the world must not be forgotten.[11]

On the following day – while the British press involved itself in the 'Corpse Factory' calumny and the French prematurely celebrated victory on the Aisne – the same newspaper, with evident foreign-office approval, reflected on America's declaration of war. Since the 'league of our enemies is gradually growing into such a monster that its instability must soon be seen'.

> [Only] our overpowering strength keeps the league together... our victorious resistance forces the league to gather from all corners of the earth everything that can be collected to break our great strength. In this

> process, the league of necessity weakens its own offensive force and unity of action; it is reducing its efficiency, and it cannot be much longer before recognition of this fact dawns upon the Entente.[12]

The venerable liberal-democratic *Vossische Zeitung*, while singing the praise of Hindenburg and taking striking workers to task, concerned itself with the old matériel versus morale theme. The English had fallen back on their 'spirit of organization' to combat Hindenburg's ability to exploit the 'decisive factor', but Germans could place 'blind confidence [in] his nerves of steel'.

> The present Anglo-French attack does not show a single new factor. It is always the same old picture – increased artillery effectiveness, mechanical smashing down of opponents, and, finally, advance into lines that have been flattened out. As long as the mechanical superiority of the enemy lasts, the Hindenburg strategy of voluntary evacuation is the only possibility... In view of all this [who] in Germany can dare take upon himself the blood guilt and by stoppage of work in the munitions factories leave our brothers at the Front defenceless?[13]

That same day, Entente papers were full of headlines and communiqués suggesting the French were on the verge of victory on the Aisne. The *Times* led with a 'Great French Offensive – Attack on the Aisne – A 25-Mile Battle Front – 10,000 Prisoners – Bitter Fighting'.

> The French offensive against the Germans in the West began yesterday after a 10 days' artillery preparation on a 25-mile front between Soissons and Reims. Already our Allies are in possession of 10,000 prisoners, the first enemy defensive line between Soissons and Craonne, and the second enemy line between Craonne and Javincourt. They have also reached the Aisne Canal between Loivre and Courcy. The fighting has been very bitter.[14]

The Germans seemed to be describing a different battle. The *Berliner Tageblatt* announced, 'The battle on the Aisne – "One of the Greatest Battles in the History of the World" – Yesterday's Breakthrough Attempt by the French Beaten Back – 2,100 French Captured', and followed up with 'Attempted Breakthrough in Champagne Thwarted – Quiet on the Aisne – Various Minor Attacks Turned Away – 3,000 Frenchmen Captured Until Now'. By 19 April, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* was writing as though the battle, possibly the war, was won.

> [We] can describe the first part of the battles at Arras, on the Aisne, and in Champagne as won by the Germans. Hindenburg is conducting the defensive war according to a new method... Deep systems of trenches are carefully constructed, and the defence in the trenches is mobile. The

> front trenches, which are exposed to the bombardment, are lightly manned [and] powerful counter-attacks are made at the right time and in the right place. The result is that the loss of ground is slight, the casualties are diminished, and attacks are defeated in an unusually brief infantry fight...
>
> It is astonishing and scarcely conceivable how quickly the first enemy mass-attacks were overthrown. The English after a few days and the French on the first day of the attack! This justifies us in a judgement which formerly might have been described as unduly optimistic [the] battle has been won [the] worst is over.[15]

Vorwärts was more cautious. In what the *Times* described as a 'cold and almost impartial analysis of the first stage of the great battles', the dispatch in question read in part:

> We have before us a gigantic battlefield, 200 kilometres broad, and never since the beginning of the world have battles been fought of this immeasurable greatness and with such enormous masses of troops on both sides, numbering millions. It is probable also that battles have never been so bloody...
>
> It is impossible to deny that our enemies' attack, with the greatest masses that they have yet led into battle, has been appropriately planned. We hope that the bravery of our troops and the superiority of our leadership will succeed in bringing us full victory in this terrible struggle, which will last at least for weeks.[16]

Nevertheless, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*'s version of events was closer to the mark. Within days the Germans were gloating over the rout of the French 'along the whole line' and feting a victory due mostly to Hindenburg's genius. Allied communiqués simply dried up and mention of the Aisne fighting disappeared from their mass media. Eighteen months later discussion surrounding the events of April 1917 was still discouraged, as the *Figaro* stated, in the national interest.

> At the moment a polemic has been instituted about this offensive, supported by [parliamentary] deputy-journalists...Who stopped this offensive? M. Painlevé, then minister for war under pressure from parliamentarians scared at the prospect of battle? Was it General Nivelle, who had recognized the impossibility of attaining his objectives? What point is there to this discussion? As far as we are concerned, we believe it to be completely useless to reproduce in our columns articles published about these painful days.[17]

Even with absolute secrecy, a French success in hindsight seems inconceivable. Nivelle made no adjustments to counter the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg

Line, which effectively redrew the strategic map of the battlefield and ensured that Nivelle was sending his attacking waves into open country, from where the Germans had recently withdrawn. Thus exposed, they became cannon fodder for the German artillery and target practice for their machine-gunners. Worse still for Nivelle, his decision to pursue tactics that had recently been successful at Verdun came as no surprise to the Germans, who had been busily working out effective counter-measures. In hindsight it comes as no surprise that by nightfall on the first day, Nivelle's expected gain of 6 miles was in fact about 600 yards. The French had, however, taken 28,000 German prisoners and lost 'just' 120,000 casualties: a positive outcome compared with Joffre's offensive on the same front in 1915. But the French troops under Nivelle's command were not interested in body-count comparisons. The French Army of 1917 was no longer the force of docile patriots that had been led in calamitous offensive after offensive in 1914 and 1915. This time mutinies broke out which finally spread to 16 army corps. While the mutineers were prepared to defend their motherland, further wasteful offensives would no longer be tolerated. The cautious Pétain, who replaced Nivelle, found some scapegoats but otherwise sought to meet the grievances of the troops. Under Pétain's policy of waiting on Americans and tanks, the French Army underwent a period of reconstruction which lasted until mid-1918.

For the men of the List Regiment in their Douai backwater, these events might have been taking place on another planet. Now, more than ever, they were dependent on newspapers to find out what was happening a few miles from their billets. With the Battle of Arras winding down, the regiment finally saw action acting as flank-cover for a division sent to recapture Roeux, a village between Arras and Bullecourt. The event hardly rates in the regimental official history. 'At 4.40 in the morning of 16 May the 38th Division advanced in an assault on Roeux... Our regiment covered the right flank [but] the attack by the division broke down. At 9 o'clock the English massed a counter-attack [which] was repulsed.' After Roeux, the division was sent to rest again, enjoying a 'splendid time of games and sport in the abundant fertility of Flanders. The fresh, openly honest conduct of the Flemish people did our German hearts good after our long stay in French districts.' The Germanic dialect of the locals and the cultural similarities made many a Bavarian feel at home. At nearby Messines on 7 June 1917, the British won a notable victory in the first act of Haig's Flanders campaign of 1917. The capture of the Messines Ridge set in train a five-month battle that has come to symbolize all the horror and waste of the Western Front. Six months later, Rupprecht summed up that battle – known by the British as Third Ypres and the German as *Flandern 1917* – for his Sixth Army troops.

> Eighty-six divisions, 22 of which made two tours of duty took part in this most violent of all battles. Sons of all German tribes competed in heroic bravery and tenacious stamina to repulse the Anglo-French attempt [to] conquer Flanders and seize our U-boat bases. Despite enormous concentrations of men and matériel, the enemy has not succeeded.

> A tiny, devastated patch of earth is his sole gain [won] with extraordinarily high casualties, while our losses were far less... So the battle of Flanders was a heavy defeat for the enemy [and] a great victory for us.[18]

Rupprecht's post-battle assessment served as the concluding paragraph to a *Reichsarchiv* monograph written 11 years later by Werner Beumelburg. Rupprecht claimed victory, but so did Haig. Both had a case. While the Germans could argue that they had – despite British superiority in numbers and matériel – been able to suck their foes into the swamps of Ypres and inflict grievous casualties in a battle of attrition, Haig could and did say that his offensive drastically weakened the Germans and paved the way for the final Allied victory 12 months later. The point is irresolvable, since Ludendorff, using knowledge acquired from the Somme and Aisne offensives (as well as Falkenhayn's Verdun attack of 1916), had induced the British into a battle where *they* might be and were, almost, bled white. This had dramatic consequences for Gough's weakened Fifth Army, which crumbled before Ludendorff's spring offensive of 1918.

The raw and callous figures of a comparative body count can never tell the whole story, even in a battle fought on purely attritional grounds. The British at Third Ypres had seen many of their finest units decimated in attacks against positions held by soldiers who were anything but the *crème de la crème* of the German Army. Most of the 86 German divisions engaged were of the second class, albeit well trained in the skills of defensive trench warfare. Some élite units of *Sturmtruppen* were also thrown in for short, sharp counter-attacks and pulled out quickly when their short-term objective was achieved. Since the British were obliged to keep their best attacking troops in action so as to exploit the first sign of enemy weakness, the diminishing cream of the British Empire was pitted against men who, in a military sense, were more expendable. Yet even without a qualitative evaluation of losses, the Germans clearly won the battles of attrition of late 1917. Official British figures reveal that at Third Ypres and Cambrai, the British suffered 448,614 casualties against German losses of 270,710. At the Somme in the previous year, the story had been much the same, with the British losing 481,842 and the Germans 236,194. When *French* losses for the Battle of the Somme are considered (about 250,000), the Germans, on the defensive, were winning the attritional battles that Haig and Edmonds later claimed as Allied successes, by a ratio of about 3:1. Nonetheless, some British historians have discounted or ignored their own official statistics in favour of the figures 'supporting' the claim that while the Germans constantly underestimated their losses, the British (for reasons that were scarcely convincing) overestimated theirs.[19]

Although the British 'step-by-step' principle of limited objectives was an improvement on the costly assaults of the Somme, the Germans had been working to improve their defensive tactics, so much so that they later claimed not only to know where the British intended to strike, but to have their tactical measure. The British never 'sufficiently considered the new elastic defensive pattern of the

Germans, which originated in the experiences of the Somme battle and was instilled into the troops in the winter of 1916–17'.

> The English persistence with artillery fire, which regularly destroyed the German forward defensive positions, permitted a comparatively smooth passage for German reserves who were organized in depth, so that almost every offensive push could be answered with an effective counter-attack. The weak occupation of the forward lines and the fighting zone between the forward and the main resistance line, the chessboard-like partitioned formation of machine-guns and the holding-back of the first counter-attack until after the loss of the forward fighting zone spared many [German] casualties.[20]

Tired British troops who survived machine-gun fire and artillery in the struggle across no-man's-land might find themselves occupying ruined and empty German trenches where they were vulnerable, first to mortar and artillery bombardment, and then to counter-attacks by fresh German storm troops. Yet in all these over-costly fights for tiny patches of earth, the British clung onto enough German forward positions and repeated the procedure often enough to extend their line to the top of the ridges around Ypres. From there, they finally captured that pile of rubble, mud, battlefield debris and human remains that was Passchendaele. Thus, say defenders of Haig's campaign, were the British freed from observation and artillery bombardment. This respite would be short, for the Germans recaptured most of these positions four months later.

While the build-up for Haig's Flanders campaign of 1917 continued, the List Regiment was resting in a backwater near Bruges (Brugge). Still the Entente seemed oblivious to the need for secrecy, and German newspapers were filled with news of the massive build-up of British soldiers and of Anglo-American *matériel*. By mid-July, it was clear that the 6th BRD would be among the *Stellunsgsdivisionen* to experience the artillery barrage that preceded Third Ypres.

> On 13 July the regiment was put into the Gheluvelt sector where it had received its baptism of fire [and] lost its first commander. The few remaining Listers who had marched out in 1914 recognized the place wistfully. As the focus of the year-long fight for Hill 60, the landscape presented a chaotic picture of destroyed, shot up, exploded and freshly constructed positions, house ruins, rubbish tips and craters, splintered trees, decomposing material.[21]

Then all hell rained down. Tubeuf calculated a loss of 800 men, killed, wounded or taken prisoner during the 10 days between 13 and 23 July. In describing the 'frightful, painful losses' wrought upon the regiment at this 'most wretched time', he is as much concerned with those incapacitated by the 'daily gas attacks from gas-mine salvoes [and] heavy artillery fire interspersed with gas shells' as

with men killed. The troops had experienced gas at Aubers and Le Barque, but never on the scale or intensity of Third Ypres and never mustard gas, which was being used by the British for the first time. Since the British barrage concentrated on the lightly held German forward trenches, the number of men killed and wounded was less than might have been the case. Yet, men do not have to see comrades dying in numbers to lose hope. Watching agonized, blinded comrades being led off to first-aid posts or coughing up their lungs can be just depressing or frightening, especially when the survivors have to stagger around day after day in the summer heat, in half-suffocating gas masks awaiting an attack that never seems to come. Perhaps the much-vaunted German defensive tactics were not employed so effectively on the 6th BRD's sector as elsewhere, for the division was terribly exposed to the enemy's preliminary bombardment and much weakened as a consequence.

> Day and night our infantry waited in vain for the [British] attack, the uncertainty and frightfulness of the situation producing a feeling of insecurity heightened by the sounds of mining activity under our position [and] of ever-present enemy observation planes, flying far beyond our position so that even the roads and paths of our hinterland are under constant fire by night. [The] surviving men become exhausted by nervous strain and constant bodily over-fatigue, worn out from the inhalation of gas-filled air.[22]

On 23 July, the exhausted division was relieved. Its respite lasted two days, for it was sent to man the trenches in a sector just north of their previous position, which Tubeuf described as a 'wasteland, shot to pieces [and] sporadically marshy'. If their previous experience of the British bombardment had been demoralizing, it was but a taste of what was to come. Anzacs were among the troops manning the line in front of the Bavarians and C.E.W. Bean described the intensified bombardment, beginning on 28 July, which preceded the main offensive.

> From now on, the enemy was to be given no rest, and no chance of getting up ammunition, supplies, or relief without considerable loss. For three days and nights the howitzers, heavy and light, pounded the known German batteries, while the eighteen-pounders sprinkled the enemy's forward... areas with shrapnel or, by night, drenched them with gas.[23]

On 30–31 July, the last night of the barrage, the fire became 'particularly severe'. All batteries 'opened with gas at midnight and continued steadily till 3.50, when all guns on the battlefield passed to the continuous twelve hours' task of covering the attack'. Thus, at about seven on the morning of 31 July 1917, the second and principal phase of Third Ypres was launched with a British attack

'on a front of 25 kilometres, with the operation of massed artillery and munitions as had seldom occurred in the West'.

> Air-raid warnings sound. Fliers carry the attack forward. Tank squadrons attempt to annihilate the remains of our defensive positions. The way back from the dispatch-runners' shelter fills with clouds of smoke and gas. Our machine guns spew death into the storming masses of Englishmen.... The attack disintegrates into wild confusion and congeals with the onset of rain.[24]

In the List Regiment's sector the British, supported by tanks and low-flying aircraft, captured the first line of trenches and penetrated 500 metres, a result which Tubeuf called 'a great success for our weakened regiment'. Even by the elastic standards of Great War regimental histories, this loss of ground hardly amounted to success. On the worst days of the Somme, this regiment had surrendered no more than a few metres of trench and now, on the first day of battle, it had lost its whole first line and allowed a penetration enormous by trench-warfare standards. Tubeuf's account glosses over a disaster, placing himself, in his first serious battle as commander, in charge of a 'great success'. The most likely explanation for the collapse on the List Regiment front seems to be 'tank fright'. On 31 July, while rain threatened, it did not fall until 4:30 p.m., meaning that for most of the day the conditions were ideal for the heavy British tanks of 1917; a weapon which few of the men of the List Regiment had seen and none, as yet, faced in battle.[25]

Third Ypres had brought Lieutenant Adolf Meyer back in the front-line trenches again and, as he had been in May 1915, he was once more in the thick of the action. When they were pulled out of the line on 23 July, Meyer and his men hoped that they would be going into rest. But the pending British attack meant that no regiment could be spared. On 26 July, they returned to man a freshly constructed position near Hooge on the main road from Ypres to Menin. Meanwhile, the British bombardment was continuing unabated. A pause towards seven on the morning of 31 July forewarned the Germans and 'the English attack began. On a 25-kilometre front, the English threw division after division at our line. Heavy fog favoured the advance and the offensive.' In his forward observation post, Meyer felt superfluous and 'reported immediately to the regimental battle station'. The news was not good. 'Where the company strength in the last few days had sunk to an average of 50 men, on this morning the count was scarcely 30 and offered little defence against the attacking waves of the enemy and the extraordinarily strong tank offensive.'

> At midday, two machine-gun companies from the Reserve Infantry Regiment 238 arrived as reinforcements. They had to be sent out in small groups from the regimental headquarters... Two officers (including myself) and the six dispatch runners led the way. From a hollow that

> protected us from observation, we had to cross some 200 metres, fully observed, of unprotected open land. Because of the heavy machine guns and ammunition cases we had to keep to the road [where] we were subjected to heavy artillery fire and also ... machine guns. I can still see to this day two English tanks which had been brought to a stop by our artillery on the main road from Ypres to Menin, but which continued to give service in spite of it all by fearlessly spraying us with their machine guns.[26]

What remains fixed in Meyer's memory is the continuing effectiveness of two tanks that had already either broken down or been immobilized by German fire. 'With their last ounce of strength, the few unwounded survivors dragged the machine guns and cartridge cases into the foremost position. It was a miracle that all the guides from our regimental staff, both officers and the six dispatch runners, among them Hitler, had come through unscathed.'[27]

Hitler witnessed the waves of assault troops and the effectiveness of British tanks in conditions that favoured them. This had a profound impact, reinforced in the last months of the war when the regiment was defenceless against the swarms of French light tanks and marauding fighter-bombers. Yet, it was the heavy British tanks at Ypres that left the most lasting impression. In 1941 he told confidants: 'At the end of the Great War, experience had shown that only the heaviest and most thickly armoured tank had any value.' By 'experience', he presumably means his own, empirical, experience. Of the Flanders fighting in 1917, he said:

> Our first orders for the production of tanks were issued in 1917. If we'd had 400 tanks in the summer of 1918 we'd have won the world war. It was our misfortune that the leadership at that time did not correctly recognize the significance of technical weapons ... That the need for tanks and defences against them was not recognized by us was the ground of our downfall.[28]

A significant admission from a man publicly obsessed with the *Dolchstoss*: Hitler and Meyer's experience of tanks, however, was limited. The prevailing images of tanks and Third Ypres – conveyed by official painting and war photography – is of mortally wounded behemoths, immobilized in seas of mud. Even so, Hitler had a point: 400 tanks could not have won the war for Germany, but they might have prolonged it into 1919. Given Ludendorff's contempt for the weapon, however, their production was never going to be a priority. Indeed his scathing attacks on German troops who suffered what he derided as 'tank-fright' were, such that post-war German military historians were reluctant to write of regiments retreating before them. Better units than the List Regiment had crumbled against tanks. At Bullecourt three months before Third Ypres, a crack regiment of the 27th (Württemburg) Division had fled before an amateurish British tank

attack in which no tank managed to fire a meaningful shot. Yet, the only mention of this two-sided débâcle is a gloating reference in a sister regiment's history.[29]

What actually happened to the List Regiment at Third Ypres? According to Tubeuf, the division survived its gas and artillery ordeals in good shape, continued to man the trenches after 31 July and, at the cost of a *slight* loss of ground (500 metres!), succeeded in throwing back the same British storm troops against whom, Meyer claims, the regiment 'offered little resistance'. Hitler described the regiment's strength when it was relieved as being down to that of 'a few companies: crusted with mud they tottered back, more like ghosts than men'. Hitler and Tubeuf both agree that the regiment was relieved on the night of 1–2 August, yet Allied intelligence claimed that the division lost so 'heavily from the artillery preparation' that it had to be relieved on 'July 30 before the British attack'. While this is impossible, the view gains support in Beumelburg's *Reichsarchiv* monograph, *Flandern 1917*, which makes no mention of the 6th BRD *after* 30 July – until when it formed part of 'Gruppe Wijtschate'. The 6th BRD was not alone in its suffering during the pre-battle bombardment.

> The losses among the trench divisions were frightful. Artillery was also lost. At no point however, was the final line (of trenches) reached. The heavy enemy fire stopped. The first great attack had been turned back, new [attacks] were to come.
> It rained in streams.
> The mutilated land became a morass.[30]

The most extensive and believable account of the 6th BRD's experience at Third Ypres is to be found in the Bavarian official history, and even this appears to exaggerate the division's achievement at the expense of its failures. It too concentrates on the severity and demoralizing effect of the two-week-long British bombardment.

> No wonder it consumed the nervous reserves of the leaders and troops, when the battle strength was being so quickly diminished. In the last days of July, in view of the pending [British] offensive, it was thus necessary [to] replace the majority of the trench divisions. Also in the position of the 6th BRD, the 52nd Reserve Division began marching in.[31]

One battered and depleted Bavarian division was seeking to move out of its position at the same time as a Prussian reserve division was beginning to enter the trenches. With the replacement procedure still incomplete, the British began their offensive. This was 'unleashed' early on the morning of 31 July.

> Some 40 English divisions, supported on their left wing by some two French divisions, break out in overcast weather just before 6 in the morning... Aircraft and tanks protect the deep and narrowly joined

> waves, rows, troops and columns. A powerful waltz of fire screams slowly in advance of the attack...
>
> On the battlefield field, the 6th BRD is at first mixed up with half of the 52nd RD... But the Bavarian leaders and troops, which have not yet been relieved or replaced and who have endured 17 days in the position, spring to the aid of their Prussian comrades...
>
> The Bavarian machine gunners mow down the English rows. But the ground mist and fumes, which lie on the battlefield, are well disposed towards the unyielding enemy masses... The thoroughly intermingled Bavarian and Prussian elements are finally overwhelmed by the crude power of the enemy...
>
> The 6th BRD can, however, leave the battlefield in the knowledge that, despite being surprised in the unluckiest moment of the attack, it had scarcely lost 1 km [*sic*] of ground. It would be immediately transported away to a peaceful sector. In 17 days it had lost some 40 officers and 2900 men in Flanders.[32]

Meanwhile the British had ceased to talk of sweeping Flanders free of Germans or of taking the Belgian channel ports. Just before the great British mid-September offensive, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* wrote of there being 'no question' now that 'the "famous steel nerves" of the other side' were 'seriously diminishing'. Trapped in the mud, their 'general offensive does not budge'.

> Since August 26, [the] English have been... very unsuccessful. They seem to have used up their superfluity of reserves more rapidly than was intended... [The] real war-work still rests upon the divisions which were filled up before the attacks in which they took part on July 31 and August 16... These people know war in the swampy trenches of Flanders: they have made their acquaintance with German resistance, and they know that their storm attacks are prone to run their course.[33]

The capture of a tiny hamlet in the path to the slightly larger hamlet of Paschendaele caused the *Times* to devote a leader to 'The Victory of Broodseinde'. Although German losses, 'especially in prisoners, were alarmingly large', Hindenburg was in full control, sucking British troops into traps where they were duly annihilated. The German people should not worry about the loss of hamlets. Professor Wegener in the *Kölnische Zeitung* argued that the enemy must 'continue to put his hopes [in] material superiority', in order to break the 'incomparable fighting strength of the German soldier'.

> This is all in accordance with the English way of thinking, for their battle is fundamentally a battle of money... Of course, it all depends upon whether real men to use them are behind the material and the machines. But we all know that that is the case with the English, and we

> are far from wanting to deny it; on the contrary, we should be diminishing the achievements of our own men if we did.[34]

In the first week of November, Third Ypres concluded when Passchendaele fell to the Canadians. Its loss merited a note in German papers and a collective sigh of relief on the British side. A decade later Beumelburg's *Reichsarchiv* monograph described the loss of the ruined village thus:

> Attack after attack, clashing over the expanse of rubble, is textured into a jumble of bloody individual hand-to-hand combats, which are simultaneously played out across the whole debris-filled complex... The artillery of both sides shoots indiscriminately into the ruins.
> At midnight, Passchendaele is lost...
> Passchendaele remains in the hands of the Canadians.[35]

13

1918

By 1 August the Ypres battlefield was a morass and a day later, according to Tubeuf, the regiment entered trenches in Alsace – an impossible logistical feat given the 300 or so miles that separate the two provinces! On the other hand, Meyer claims, reasonably, that it took a week to effect the transfer to Alsace, the regiment entering a quiet sector near Mülhausen (Mullhouse), on 8 August. Alsace had been part of the German Empire since 1871 and, for the first time in the war, the regiment faced the prospect of fighting on German soil.

> We believed ourselves transported to the Garden of Eden after all our privations and the constant contact with death. During this time, our group received a fourteen-day training in information technology. Sadly, the months in the Alsace position flew by all too quickly. For the first time in three years, we were able to enjoy the beauty of summer among a German population. We saw happy, laughing soldiers everywhere.[1]

They still had trenches to man, but these were 'broad, comfortable, scarcely damaged, boarded up with palings and protected by roofing-felt, splendidly drained in the midst of an idyllic fruit-garden in an unspoiled area. The French in the opposing trenches [are] hardly noticeable.' The regiment lost just 22 men killed in two and a half months in upper Alsace. Not everyone, however, would recall his time in Alsace fondly, certainly not Adolf Hitler.

> I remember, it was before we arrived at Colmar. The railway employee who coveted Foxl came again to our carriage and offered me two hundred marks. 'You could offer me two hundred thousand, and you wouldn't get him!' When I left the train at Harpsheim, I suddenly noticed that the dog had disappeared . . . I was desperate. The swine who stole my dog doesn't know what he did to me.[2]

During their first few days in Mülhausen, the men of the List Regiment still displayed a certain 'nervousness', which, as Meyer suggests, was brought 'from

the Ypres battle'. They soon relaxed and spent 'the most peaceful time for us in the whole world war' before returning with the division to France, in the Ailette sector on the Chemin des Dames, late in October 1917. Aside from the food (or lack of it) and the antipathy of the natives, life there was hardly more dangerous than Alsace. Indeed in the five months between 24 October 1917 and 25 March 1918 the regiment lost just 61 men killed. Early in 1918, the division began training as an offensive unit, taking part in a course in open warfare, in which 'artillery and aeroplanes participated'. This was overseen by the Prussian crown prince and Ludendorff, who decided that the 6th BRD did not meet the required standard, and for the rest of the war it was 'never used as a break-through division, merely a follow up'. While his comrades were in Alsace, Hitler took home leave, spent first with Schmidt and the latter's sister in Dresden and then in Berlin. In 1916 he had sent a postcard to Schmidt describing the city as 'magnificent, a real world city... I lack for nothing'. In 1917 he wrote to Amman complaining that 'the days here [in Berlin] fly so fast'. By 1942 he was more critical, but insisted he had 'never dreamt of spending those leaves in Munich. My pleasure would have been spoilt by the sight of all those priests. On both occasions, I came to Berlin, and that's how I began to be familiar with the museums of the city.'[3]

He rejoined his regiment, now manning a four-kilometre stretch of trenches in front of Laon near the Chemin des Dames, on 17 October 1917. As at First Ypres in 1914 the men were busy digging in to create a defensible position. This time, according to Meyer, 'there was no danger of being taken by surprise, for the canal lay as a natural obstacle between the lines of trenches', but it was still necessary 'to build a robust line [since] the highly desired town of Laon lay to our rear'. With winter approaching, construction accelerated. 'In the first weeks, we often suffered strong enemy fire. This eased significantly however, in weight as in violence, in December so that one may speak of enjoying Christmas in a quiet sector.' Digging trenches in cold weather was a rude awakening to men grown used to *la dolce vita* in Alsace. To make matters worse, field rations had been cut again: the dispatch runners' dugout now bore the painted slogan:

> *With marmalade and Barras*
> *We're marching on Arras.*[4]

A diet of army bread and jam may have suited Hitler, but it was hardly adequate for carnivorous, sausage-loving Bavarians. Hitler listened to their gripes about food and led them in complaints about the privileged lifestyle and arrogance of permanent base wallahs.

> Once Adolf Hitler had to take an order to the divisional staff. On his return, he was so full of anger and rage that I [Brandmayer] finally asked what had happened. Shaking with rage and filled with indignation he burst out: 'It is the absolute limit the way they all carry on at the base.

> One ought to grab all these fellows by the collar and stick them in the trenches.'[5]

Since dispatch runners were not required to dig trenches, Hitler, Weiss, Mund, Schmidt and Brandmayer enjoyed the onset of their fourth year on the Western Front in relative peace. Then, at the end of January 1918, the division went into rest. 'What a wonderful time! Misery and need are quickly forgotten. Anxiety and fear, through the long war years, have become unknown conceptions. So the visits each day of aviators dropping bombs does not disrupt in the least our royal Bavarian rest.' Apart from food, the only thing lacking was letters from home. Newspapers, with their propaganda and morale-boosting contents, received priority at the expense of personal mail. This finally arrived in a flood. As usual, there was nothing for Hitler. Brandmayer, however, had received a letter from his girl friend.

> Hitler saw this and asked in a good-humoured tone: 'Brandmoari, has Trutschnelda written again?' 'Good guess,' I retorted.
>
> 'Have you never wanted a girl?' I asked. 'Look Brandmoari, I've never found time for such a thing,' Hitler replied. 'And I don't want to,' he continued. 'You're a strange one, Adi! I'll never understand you,' I replied. 'There's no hope for you.'[6]

In 1918, many young men felt obliged to keep themselves pure for marriage. Even so, 28 pushing 29, was a ripe age for a man to be sexually inexperienced. Hitler's comrades mocked his celibacy and fear of miscegenation, and poked fun at his sexual attitudes and prudery. One day, as the dispatch runners were sitting around a table:

> 'How would it be if I found a mam'selle for us?' said one [in] response to the airing of a similar theme. 'I'd kill myself from shame rather than make love to a French woman', Hitler leapt excitedly into the discussion. The effect for the moment was raucous laughter. 'Listen to the monk!' cried one. Hitler's face became serious. 'Don't any of you feel your honour as a German any more?'[7]

Meyer described the regiment's losses in the period between 3 November 1917 and 25 March 1918 'as tolerable, as here the regiment had only 13 dead to mourn'. During this time, the days spent in Laon were always 'the finest. In this town all comforts were on offer and countless canteens tempted consumers.' In early March, it became obvious 'something powerful was being prepared in the German rear. Members from all possible troop detachments: infantry, artillery, cavalry, pioneers, supply trains, aviators and mortars were passing through. Endless munitions columns streamed in the direction of La Fère.' On the morning of 21 March, a 'most violent German artillery barrage was launched to our right'.

> The great battle for France had broken out. From La Fère to Croiselles, the German attack had commenced over a front of 70 kilometres. At 10 in the morning, the regiment already had news that the German offensive had gained an overall success…
>
> It was clear to all of us that in a brief time we too would set out on the advance.[8]

The great battle was Ludendorff's so-called *Kaiserschlacht*, his potentially war-winning strike of spring 1918. This had long been expected and discussed in the press on both sides, but the timing and point of the attack remained a mystery to the Allies. On the grounds of secrecy, OHL had determined that units not directly involved would be kept uninformed about this offensive, code-named Michael, ensuring that the attack came as a brutal shock to the troops of the British Fifth Army. The 5-hour preliminary barrage felt and heard by the men in Laon exceeded, in weight of munitions, Montgomery's expenditure at El Alamein in 1942. As soon as the bombardment lifted, specially trained storm troops stationed close behind this hurricane of steel – and profusely armed with grenades, machine pistols and a new type of sub-machine gun – stormed into the British trenches, swarming over confused and shattered survivors. In one morning, open warfare returned to the Western Front.[9]

Victory in the East had released almost half a million men for the service in the West. A German force of over 200 divisions could be pitted against an Allied total of about 175. This advantage was short-term. American troops were streaming into France. Although raw and under-trained, they offered fresh blood and enthusiasm as well as numbers, and the French, Pétain particularly, saw them as war-breakers. But the Germans also realized that French interests were served in waiting for Americans and tanks. With the situation on the home front desperate, it was obvious that Germany must force a rapid decision or at least create a situation where peace negotiations could be undertaken from a position of strength. OHL had used élite units sparingly in the defensive battles of 1917, taking every opportunity to train them in the latest tactics of open warfare. Once these élite troops had been committed to battle and the Western Front casualty factor favouring defence over attack came into play – what then? The divisions coming from the East were a mixed bag. While some of them were better trained (and more experienced) in attack than their Western Front counterparts, many others, to Rupprecht's chagrin, were in a poor state, including in their ranks former prisoners of the Russians. In addition, there was always the fear that Bolshevism might have infected these Easterners.[10]

Although the Germans had no idea how close the French Army had come to mutiny in 1917, they knew that their formidable opponents of 1914–16 had spent 1917 rebuilding. Through subterfuge and leaked misinformation, the Germans nevertheless encouraged the idea that the offensive would be directed against the French. Instead, they attacked the British, who they believed had been weakened by Haig's offensives of 1916–17. Only a handful of French divisions had fought

in Haig's Flanders campaign. So while the British were haemorrhaging at Arras, Flanders and Cambrai, the French had been holding the line in relatively quiet sectors and attempting to restore some of the old ardour of 1914–16. Nevertheless, Ludendorff's intelligence would have told him that the state of the Fifth Army was not indicative of the BEF as a whole. Michael represented a high-risk operation, since much of Fifth Army's plight stemmed from Lloyd George's distrust of Haig. The British prime minister, as Martin Middlebrook tells it, had 'had enough of offensives and, to stop Haig, he simply kept the reinforcements back at home'. By this measure, the BEF was left 'in no fit state to mount a new offensive in 1918. Whether it could even defend itself against a German offensive was soon to be put to the test.'[11]

Lloyd George's decision at least ensured that British troops were available when needed after the German advance had petered out and when they were most vulnerable to heavy Allied counter-offensives. In the meantime, however, a fatigued and under-manned Fifth Army faced annihilation while some 650,000 fit officers and men languished in the British Isles. Among these were 10 crack dominion divisions, now enjoying their longest rest since early 1916. With conscription now in force, Canada and New Zealand had no trouble making up the numbers and even Australia, which still depended on volunteers, had been able to restore the strength of its force in the five months since Passchendaele. These dominion divisions represented barely 20 per cent of the total British force, but, rested and reinforced, were ready and able to play critical roles in the fighting to come. It was also to their advantage when the Germans broke through on 21 March that they were out of the line.

Ludendorff's original idea – similar to Falkenhayn's of October 1914 – was to drive a wedge between the British and French armies. If the British could be forced back to the Channel, then, divided from the French, they could be left with no choice but to evacuate the continent, à la Dunkirk, 22 years later. Michael began with spectacular success, but not spectacular enough, for the first-day results fell short of what Ludendorff expected. By 23 March he was already revising his plan.

> The object now is to separate the French and British by a rapid advance on both sides of the Somme. The Seventeenth and Sixth armies and later the Fourth Army will conduct the attack against the British north of the Somme, in order to drive them into the sea. They will keep attacking in new places in order to bring the whole British front to ruin.[12]

A part of the German force had achieved a breakthrough south of the Somme, but the major thrust of the attack, a north-westerly drive designed to sweep the British into the sea, was foundering on unexpectedly tough resistance around Arras. After wasting too much time trying to take this strongpoint, Ludendorff decided instead to exploit the success on the Somme, focussing on the capture of Amiens. This was high-risk ersatz strategy. Ludendorff seems not to have asked

himself how supplies were to be kept up to his storm troops when the path to Amiens cut straight across the debris-covered, trench- and crater-scarred, Somme battlefield of 1916.

The old Somme battlefield was not the only problem. After hearing for two years how the British were suffering under the effects of Germany's U-boat campaign, the food and drink left behind by the retreating Fifth Army was of a quality and quantity unseen by most Germans since 1914, while British bandages were made, not from paper-based synthetics, but crepe and muslin. Along with the realization of how well 'Tommy' lived came the discovery that looting, gorging and guzzling were more fun than fighting. With Amiens cathedral in view, the German advance stalled on 9 April at the textile-manufacturing township of Villers-Bretonneux. Meanwhile the Allied press, explaining 'as little as possible', was admitting that a 'powerful German attack over 80 kilometres... pushed with extreme energy and vigour [had] succeeded in crossing the lines of our advance posts'. Executed in 'massed formations' this had been 'terribly costly to the enemy who has suffered extremely high losses'. The Germans trumpeted this 'first great fighting day... under the leadership of the Kaiser' with news that the British had been 'cleared out of the salient to the south-west of Cambrai'. On 24 March the *Berliner Tageblatt* proclaimed 'the first part of the great battle won' and on the 25th headlined 'Advance on Albert' and 'Capture of Péronne'. While Wilhelm was telling the Reichstag that the 'preparation, leadership and the energy of the troops have, with God's help, severely shaken England's military power. Daily, we advance', the *Kölnische Zeitung* offered a cautionary note. 'The fighting is terrible and the task that we must achieve is enormous.' The British were fighting in typical 'obstinate character [with] extraordinary courage': German soldiers spoke of them 'in the most laudatory terms'.[13]

The List Regiment began to learn of the magnificent achievements of late March while the men were being prepared to join in the battle. Peace with Russia 'strengthened hope' in Brandmayer that 'white flags, signalling our victory, would be hoisted just as quickly on the Western Front'.

> We all felt within us the approach of the long-desired peace. Peace – the tug of the homeland – already these thoughts in themselves gave us courage and the confidence to endure patiently the few months that the war on the battlefields of France would perhaps still last. With songs of home on their lips again for the first time in years, the fighting battalions of the glorious List Regiment pushed on.[14]

On 26 March the 6th BRD set off from Laon to Foudrain, where a few officers were permitted to view the great gun – known by the Germans as the *Wilhelmgeschütz* (in honour of the Kaiser) and by the British as 'Big Bertha' – which was shelling Paris from nearby Creppy. As a follow-up attack division, the 6th BRD had the task of clearing out positions and strongpoints that had been deliberately bypassed by advancing storm troops. On 27 March it entered battle on the

Somme, crossing the captured British line on the 28th and occupying a position near Tergnier. It remained here for one and a half days 'without an enemy in front of us'. On 1 April, the division 'reached the German assault regiments near Fontaine (Montdidier)', where the advance, after attaining a depth of 70 kilometres, had lost momentum. Once more the regiment was put to work consolidating a defensive position. In Meyer's words:

> In view of the enormous extent of the greatly destroyed territory to our rear, which made bringing up all construction materials almost impossible, this work was effected with the greatest difficulty. In addition the enemy now exerted all force to prevent a further German advance. In violent attacks the united enemy forces tried to throw us back again into the wasteland to our rear.[15]

By now Tubeuf felt that the regiment had acquired 'a fresh spirit of attack' and expected it 'to prove itself by taking part in [further] great successes'. He would have to wait; his regiment began fighting 'just as the offensive was beginning to weaken'. It now found itself in a small salient 'to the west of Montdidier, exposed to enemy fire on three sides'. Here it remained on the 'defensive for 26 days enduring the heaviest losses'. The Bavarians had been told that 'France's last reserves were concentrated at Montdidier.' Instead, they found the troops opposite to be numerous, well supplied and infused with a do-or-die spirit – especially a fearsome Algerian Zouave regiment. Artillery, however, caused most casualties. Since to 'describe the fighting and suffering would fill a book on its own', Brandmayer wrote of the consequences.

> After a few days, not one house remained standing in the fire-zone, here and there were piles of rubble [as] mute testament to the bloodiest events that had ever taken place on the face of the earth. On bright moonlight nights, the ruins loomed ghostlike over the wide battlefield, reaching heavenwards as though in mourning for their former splendour.
>
> [The] dispatch runners lay in the cellar of a badly damaged château... Supplies [were] so inadequate, that a real famine broke out after eight days. Our group had to make do with a loaf of bread a day between us. Hitler and I often crept out at night and searched the terrain for livestock. Pieces were cut from the cadaver of a horse that was no longer fresh and with overflowing hearts handed to our culinary artist. Rain puddles supplied useful water to some extent. And if this made us sick, then it at least suppressed our hunger. The men were becoming jittery. After 26 days, it was high time we were relieved.[16]

Among List Regiment veterans who knew all three battles, Montdidier left as powerful an impression as the 10 days on the Somme or their ordeal at Third Ypres. By 23 April, still days from being relieved, the regiment had already lost

'23 officers [and] 1123 men, of whom 153 were dead, 632 wounded and 338 sick, that being almost half the complement'. In 1933, Brandmayer recalled Montdidier with profound loathing.

> On 1 May, we had not removed either shirts or trousers from our bodies since 16 March. Our faces had become old, our eyes reddened from the long, sleepless nights. Our uniforms hung from our bodies in rags... For anyone who was there, the bloodbath and suffering are unforgettable. A picture of the war is forever in his memory... Montdidier...[17]

With the 6th BRD bogged down in trench warfare, other German units were, according to the communiqués, forging through open country in a do-or-die burst for glory and victory. In the German press dispatches and editorials continued to crow about 'English losses of a half-million men since 21 March', but by early April Ludendorff was becoming aware that he had what Asprey called 'a strategical failure of the first degree' on his hands. With Michael stalled, he initiated a second great offensive (St George), against the British in the north near Fromelles. This meant switching storm troops from Picardy, offering scope for the Allies to recuperate from the shock of Michael and lessening the chance of German success in the drive on Amiens. Given the weakening state of the German forces, the plan for St George to be a broad-based offensive over a front of 50 miles from La Bassée beyond Ypres was turned into a narrow-front offensive between La Bassée and Armentières, supplemented by attacks on the old Ypres salient.[18]

St George was launched on 9 April 1918. Nine German divisions hit two Portuguese holding six miles of front. The 'Portuguese melted' and malicious tales entered British folklore. This was hardly fair. Later Bean rightly asked why were they 'expected to fight so formidable an enemy in a cause of which they knew little'? Nevertheless, one Allied division was holding firm: the machine-gunners of the British 55th Division found, as had the Germans before them, that the flat, coverless Flanders landscape made the enemy easy targets. Still, with numbers on their side, the Germans advanced six miles that first day and crossed the river Lys the next. Meanwhile in Belgium, in the space of a day, they recaptured all the centres won at such heavy cost by the British in 1917. Armentières fell on the 11th and on the 12th the Germans were less than five miles from Hazebrouk, the strategic point of the St George operation. This they failed to take. In Germany the papers still crowed: 'Victorious progress of the battle for Armentières – The Lys crossed – Bois Grenier, Neuve-Chapelle and the heights of Messines stormed.' On 21 April 1918, summing up the 'first month of the German offensive', the *Berliner Tageblatt* claimed that the offensive had 'safeguarded Germany's international reputation'. What it meant is unclear.[19]

The List Regiment was pulled out of Montdidier on 1 May. In spite of its 'extraordinary losses and exhaustion', the divisional commander was told that his troops must be prepared to fight immediately. With men collapsing from

exhaustion or illness, he argued for and won 'a few days respite for bathing and delousing'. On 3 May, the division was sent to a sector close to their earlier position before Laon. What ensued was another grim attritional fight against tough and resourceful French troops.

> The severely decimated regiment holds a five kilometre front. To meet every attack the valiant men have to be spaced five to six metres apart. In ten long days and despite a fifteen-hour barrage not one foothold is abandoned. We hang on jealously to each scrap of earth, wrestling with an implacable enemy. The German artillery is saving ammunition for the coming offensive on the Chemin des Dames. In the early morning of 15 May, the 6th BRD is relieved. Giddy and sick from the continued inhalation of deadly gasses we stagger back. Two dispatch runners [Hitler and Brandmayer] collapse into each other arms.[20]

At last, the division was sent for 10 days' rest, during which Hitler received a regimental citation for 'outstanding gallantry' at Fontaine and a wound badge. The rest provided an opportunity for bodies, clothing and weapons to be cleaned, replaced or repaired. While the staff readjusted to the new logistical tasks at hand, the men prepared themselves for what they were led to believe would be the last great, and victorious, offensive of the war.[21]

The shattered British and sorely tested German armies needed every spare moment in May to lick wounds and regroup. St George and Michael had been failures and the war for Germany was lost. Yet in late May 1918 this was not obvious to the troops or civilians of either side; indeed the Allied position seemed only marginally less precarious than at the end of March. While reinforcements from England were beginning to arrive, the BEF still lacked the manpower to cover Michael's bulging salient, which forced Pétain, grudgingly, to thin out his forces to cover an additional 75 miles of front. Ludendorff's armies were no longer the force of late March, but Rupprecht was known to have substantial reserves, many of them divisions from the East which, if below the standard of the decimated storm troops, should still be a match for a debilitated British force. For these reasons the British and French expected the next German offensive to be another attempt to split their armies and drive the BEF into the sea. Rumours were rife at Villers-Bretonneux (spread by captured Germans) that here would be the chosen point.

The offensive, which began on 28 May (Blücher), fell not on the Somme but on a quiet sector manned by four French and three worn-out British divisions. With 15 divisions facing 7 and surprise complete, the Front soon broke. The 6th BRD, still 'combat weary and not yet brought up to strength', was one of six divisions in reserve. German storm troops surged over the ridge of the Chemin des Dames, crossed the Aisne and by 30 May had reached the Marne near Château-Thierry. Now it was the French Army's turn to crumble in what Clemenceau called a 'lamentable rout'. German forces advanced 32 miles in three days and were

within 50 miles of Paris. Despite weariness and the loss of 59 men killed on the first day of battle, the men of the List Regiment were exhilarated by this first taste of open warfare since 1914.

> The enemy is scarcely able to defend himself. Up-hill, down-dale, through thick and thin, we follow on behind his fleeing heels. Trench warfare seems to have been overtaken in full flood by a war of movement...
>
> With Hitler, I [Brandmayer] search for companies that are advancing surprisingly quickly. Searchlights start up and plunge path and wood into an abundance of glaring light. The Froggie [*Franzmann*] had in between times reassembled. He desperately resists our assault. We run through a raging fire. Fragments of exploding shells scatter among us. Their flat trajectories drive us to distraction.[22]

The next day Brandmayer was transferred to brigade headquarters. 'I hope you come back soon!' were Hitler's parting words. He did not. A few days later this reluctant but resilient soldier received the German equivalent of a Blighty One. That was the end of his war.[23]

While the men in the assault waves were encouraged to believe they were participating in *the* final advance of the war, Blücher was intended as a feint designed to draw Allied attention and resources from the north, where Rupprecht was assembling forces for another offensive (Hagen). This diversionary bluff did not deceive Foch. Concluding that 'the stroke towards Paris had a political, not a strategic, intention', he refused to denude the north of troops. For a time it seemed as though he had taken the wrong option. Ludendorff, seduced by storm-troop successes and news of refugees fleeing Paris, decided – against all strategic good sense – to convert the feint into the crux of his offensive. As with Michael on the Somme, the German lines of communication were once more over-stretched. Again discipline broke down, but it is uncertain whether troops from the List Regiment were involved in looting or displays of drunkenness. Despite its reserve status, the regiment (as suggested by the first-day casualty count) was taking an active part in the German advance. On 31 May it stood three kilometres beyond the German positions of 1914. In less than two weeks it had 'rolled up 23 kilometres of enemy front' and captured '400 prisoners, 14 field-artillery pieces, two 15 cm cannons, some 100 machine guns, one automobile and three lorries, 15 munitions wagons, one pioneer and several troop encampments [as well as] vehicles and equipment of all kinds'. What Tubeuf called a 'quite exceptional performance was recognized by the bestowal of the highest Bavarian war order upon the commander [himself]'.[24]

This was all the more remarkable given that on 27 May the List Regiment was at 'half fighting strength [with] most of its officers having fallen out through death or wounding'. On 1 June the division captured the village of La Port only to lose it to a vigorous French counter-attack the next day. This was a portent of what was to come. Pétain had successfully pleaded with Foch for reinforcements

(including two American divisions) and well-executed counter-attacks, using fresh troops, stopped the Germans in their tracks and, as at La Port, drove them back. On 6 June, American divisions began a counter-attack in the Bois de Belleau, which lasted a fortnight, and on 9 June, Ludendorff tried a breakthrough from Noyon against the left flank of the Compiègne salient (Gneisenau). This was quickly aborted. With Blücher and Gneisenau in tatters, Ludendorff let his forces recuperate for another month. From 1 to 17 June, the List Regiment 'in spite of an extraordinary melting away of its strength [held] not only its position on the Aisne on a front facing south, but also, at a right-angle to it, a two kilometre front facing west'. At half-combat strength after Montdidier, by the time it was relieved on 17 June the regiment had almost 'melted away'. During 7 days of rest it acquired 329 reinforcements and an influx of 'lightly wounded and mildly sick' men, 'scurrying back from the field hospitals'. On 27 June, the regiment was on the march again, to a position by Passy sur Marne. On 30 June a further 573 reinforcements arrived, bringing the regiment back to near full-combat strength. Between 7 and 10 July the peace in the Passy sector was disturbed by 'a violent artillery bombardment of the fighting zone and the land to the rear of it [and] by night, gas shelling'. Then it was all quiet again, if only for a few days.[25]

On 15 July, Ludendorff launched the last great German offensive of the war. In the opening blows of what became the second Battle of the Marne, the 6th BRD followed closely on the heels of the 23rd and First Guard divisions. It crossed the Marne unhindered. 'The descent into the Valley of the Marne, the countless smoking farmsteads, the advancing German assault columns and the peacefully flowing river offered an unforgettable sight to all 16-ers.' On 17 July, the division was holding a suspension bridge to the south of Courthiezy. 'That morning the Americans opposite succeeded in punching through a guard division creating a two-company wide breach.' The regiment's deputy commander called a meeting of officers, Meyer among them, ordering a counter-attack to regain the lost ground. After leaving this meeting:

> We still had a few minutes in which to tell our squad and group leaders about the situation and instruct them. I called two sergeant majors, five sergeants and a corporal together for this purpose. Just as I was beginning to give the necessary clarification, the unexpected happened! A light-artillery shot landed plumb in our midst. The effect of this direct hit was horrific! Three dead and six wounded, myself among the latter. Right shinbone cracked, large shell splinter in the right knee, the left side peppered with tiny splinters...
> Happily, I soon lost consciousness.[26]

He half awoke in agony and alone. 'I'd been left for dead and left to lie where I fell. My situation was hopeless, any, even the smallest, movement impossible. Increasing fire led me to imagine a further American penetration.' Feverish, he imagined 'the barrage wandering, always closer, closer, always thicker, explosion

after explosion, until finally a shell comes and rips me apart, before the hand of a doctor, be it German or from the enemy, could slake my agony'.

> I believe I would have to take my farewell from everything that was dear and valuable, forever, totally. After some days, they will find me, comrades or others. – Everything passes, even the most horrific. Shortly before nightfall, two men in field-grey arrive. I am able to call out. They drag me to a place near Courthiezy and deliver me to the nearest first-aid post. The helping hands are Corporal Schmidt and Corporal Hitler.[27]

Both the rapid artillery response to which Meyer fell victim and the American incursion were unexpected. Not only were the initial Allied counter-attacks effective, but the employment by the French and Americans of a similar 'elastic defence' to that used by the Germans (whose utilization had long been favoured by Pétain) made it difficult for the Germans to come to terms with their enemy. The German forces were now poised to become victims of Foch's main counter-offensive, which employed some 450 tanks of a new, light, highly mobile Renault design, supported by squadrons of low-flying bombing and strafing aircraft. The Germans were now forced into a slow, steady but decisive retreat. Once more, the 6th BRD was committed to heavy defensive fighting.

> [The] machine-gun companies are quickly reduced; the 1st machine-gun company has nobody left, the 2nd only one, and the 3rd two to man the guns! Transportation for the wounded breaks down, stretcher-bearers and medical equipment is lacking. In defence the regiment slides backwards...
>
> The drama of 19 July unrolls [as] the regiment receives the order to retreat to the north bank of the Marne. The crossing takes place on bridges and is carried out without loss, unobserved by the enemy...
>
> On 20 July, Froggie bombards the whole German front; French riflemen charge in an assault and realize too late, that the [German] position is deserted.[28]

That night the List Regiment was relieved. By now, the retreat of the German Army was 'proceeding in accordance with orders'. There were still troops and matériel to be ferried across the Marne. However, French 'direct hits destroy some pontoons along with their crews... bridges are hit, munitions must get through, artillery ferried across. The approach roads can only cope in fits and starts... A roadblock ensues. The artillery is short of horses. Munitions and machine-gun wagons cannot get through quickly enough.' Occasionally the Germans were able to stand and fight, even conducting successful counter-attacks. As the List Regiment withdrew, it was harassed in a manner never before experienced.

> Aviators whirr in tremendous numbers through the air. They reconnoitre our positions and bomb them. They machine-gun infantry, artillery and marching columns. Sporadically they fly high behind our lines and fire at a barrage balloon, which falls to the ground in flames... The most frightening, however, are aircraft armed with anti-personnel bombs, which are in action here for the first time. Twenty-five, 30 and more aircraft suddenly appear [and] each drops 40 bombs. We do not worry anymore about infantry fire [and] we have become used to artillery, but these pilots drive the troops to distraction. We literally climb up the trees, in order to avoid fearsome low-trajectory projectiles from the exploding bombs.[29]

In the last week of July near St Agnan, the regiment, 'despite heavy losses and great fatigue', made a stand. The situation was desperate, worsened by a break-down in communications. Tubeuf was so uncertain as to enemy intentions and positions, and the disposition of neighbouring German units that he decided to go out and see for himself.

> By night, I reconnoitre with my courageous men. I am granted... fresh reinforcements, for the most part young fellows who have no idea what war means... It remains ghostly quiet. Where is their garrison?... Is that an enemy battery... Quiet, sinister night. All orientation is denied.
>
> Does the enemy occupy the sector? A patrol that has been sent out fails to return. I see a French cavalry patrol... Tanks move up. The pontoon bridges seem to have been poorly mined and allow the enemy to cross the Marne.[30]

The second Battle of the Marne had ended in a complete German failure. 'Here for a second time destiny turned. From here, it went constantly backwards. After a few days the Forèt de Ris, the jumping-off point for our attack, became the concentration point for the American attack.'[31]

On 4 August 1918, Hitler was awarded the Iron Cross First Class. Meyer put Hitler's award in context: for 'many courageous frontline soldiers the EKI was as hard to win as a *Pour le mérite* [Blue Max] was for a serving officer'. Just as confusion exists over the details of Hitler's EK2, so it does over the EK1. Mend, in 1931, offered the following:

> During the heavy fighting around the Montdidier bridgehead, Adolf Hitler had an important report to deliver. As he arrived with this in the trenches, he suddenly found himself facing a troop of Frenchmen. He did not lose his presence of mind however, aimed his rifle at them and ordered the Frenchmen in their mother tongue to surrender to him... The Frenchmen threw their weapons down immediately and gave themselves up to Hitler as prisoners. He led a total of twelve to the regimental

> commander baron von Toboeuf [*sic*]. Many would have lost their nerve in this situation. Because of this outstanding deed, Adolf Hitler was awarded the Iron Cross First Class on 4 August 1918.[32]

Mend was nowhere near the Montdidier bridgehead in 1918. Hitler's sudden acquisition of French, fluent enough to enable him to convince a group of armed Frenchmen to throw down their weapons, is as difficult to believe as the idea that a single dispatch runner, armed with a rifle (dispatch runners carried pistols), could cause a squad of fully armed French soldiers to surrender! Mend's source for this unlikely tale was some List Regiment soldiers he encountered in Belgium in the last weeks of the war. Yet this absurd story was even outdone in the official version later promoted by Goebbels, who upgraded the 'troop of Frenchmen' to a French 'machine-gun nest' and ensured that the tale was taught to German schoolchildren for 12 years. Another hearsay source has the Jewish officer Gutmann promising two dispatch runners, Hitler and Schmidt, the EK1 if they completed a particularly dangerous delivery. Gutmann did indeed put Hitler's name forward. The official citation, which accompanied the award, makes it clear that this Iron Cross was not awarded for any one act of bravery, but several.

> As a runner, his coolness and dash in both trench and open warfare have been exemplary, and invariably he has shown himself ready to volunteer for tasks in the most difficult situation and at great danger to himself. Whenever communications have been totally disrupted at a critical moment in a battle, it has been thanks to Hitler's unflagging and devoted efforts that important messages have continued to get through despite every difficulty. Hitler received the Iron Cross Second Class for gallant conduct during the fighting at Wytschaete on 1 Dec. 1914. [He] fully deserves to be awarded the Iron Cross First Class.[33]

Wiedemann had once unsuccessfully recommended Hitler for an EK1. His successor, Gutmann, redrafted the original recommendation and forwarded it, this time with success. It is easy to see why Hitler chose to suppress the official account in favour of a far-fetched anecdote founded in camp gossip. The qualities Gutmann highlighted – bravery, selflessness, resilience, loyalty and dedication – were those demanded by Hitler from the 'tough as leather, hard as Krupp steel' youth of the Third Reich. Had Gutmann not been a Jew, then they surely would have been taught the true story of Hitler's EK1. Yet, how could the leader of the world's leading anti-Semitic regime admit that a Jew had gained him the right to wear the Iron Cross First Class?[34]

Following this second defeat on the Marne and as the war entered its fifth year, the Kaiser reassured his people that although they would not be 'spared further privations and tests', the 'worst' lay behind them: Germany would emerge 'strong and powerful' from the war. By now, however, Allied correspondents were already describing the 'Decline of German Confidence'.

> [The] spirit of the German troops during the last few weeks appears to have declined rapidly. Men who two months ago were certain that the Germans were going to be victorious have completely changed their attitude… blaming the German authorities for deceiving them. The reasons for their dissatisfaction are the heavy losses amongst their friends and relations [the] failure of all the big promises about the submarine campaign and General Ludendorff's offensive.[35]

Surrounded by sycophants, the Kaiser was probably unaware of the seriousness of Foch's body blow to the German armies. Nevertheless, he soon knew about Germany's next rebuff, on the Somme this time, in what Ludendorff called 'the black day of the German Army in the history of this war'. By now his army was a shadow of its former great self. 'The dark path from the wood of Compiègne to the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles', the *Reichsarchiv* monograph of 1930 concluded, 'was pursued from the catastrophe of 8 August 1918'. On the eve of the Second World War General von Lossberg called 8 August 1918 the 'worst defeat that an army had suffered in the war', yet it was impossible for many German historians to admit their 'invincible' army had been defeated at all. 'Germany's enemies had unheard of luck!' lamented the official monograph. 'Never was there an easier and less dangerous assault than that by the English, Australians, Canadians and French in the sea of fog between the Avre and the Ancre on 8 August 1918!'[36]

That sea of fog covered a 25-mile front that began near Albert, passed by Dernancourt, Sailly le Sec and Villers-Bretonneux, ending in the south by Hargincourt. Some 2,000 artillery pieces, 450 tanks, as well as five Australian, four Canadian, four British and two French infantry divisions, backed up by three British cavalry divisions, opposed 13 low-grade German infantry divisions. One of them, the 107th, had already cracked with 'tank fright' at Monash's set piece battle at Hamel the previous month and was described by a Württemburg historian as being in no 'condition to retake a lost trench'. The other divisions were scarcely better; three of them, recently arrived from the East, were suspected of Bolshevik infections. All units were handicapped by lack of Western Front experience. The 'black day' began with a 2,000-gun barrage on the sector facing the Canadians and Australians, which was followed by an assault led by 400 tanks. The German front collapsed; within hours, 16,000 prisoners had been taken as well as some 200 guns. By the end of the day 300 tanks had been either knocked out or had broken down but by then they had done their job; 6, perhaps 7, of the German divisions were no longer effective. Confronted with a disaster, Ludendorff sanctioned a communiqué highlighting a minor (German) achievement in Flanders and pretended that the Allied attack on the Somme had failed. 'On both sides of the Lys, we struck down partial English advances. To the north on the Somme, the enemy launched heavy attacks at our new defences on both sides of the Bray-Corbie road. They were repulsed.'[37]

While this was occurring, the List Regiment was regrouping near Le Cateau. Reinforcements were only partially able to refill the gaps in the ranks. Many of these were men returning from wounds or illness, but there were also a number of fresh-faced conscripts from Germany. One can imagine how Hitler and his comrades devoured news of this last phase of the second Battle of the Somme. As a true believer, Hitler was in no position to doubt what he was reading. A communiqué on 9 August stated that 'the English and French attacks against the German lines on both sides of the Bray-Corbie road as well as to the West of Montdidier [have] failed'. While the enemy had 'penetrated our first infantry and artillery positions, taken prisoners and captured cannons', the loss of ground was 'without great significance'. On 10 August a 'successful beginning' for the Anglo-French offensive was admitted, but this was due to not the military prowess, rather the 'extremely thick fog on the morning of 8 August', which wrapped the 'armoured squadrons so thickly that they were able to pass by the German anti-tank guns unhindered'. The Germans even attempted to turn 8 August into a victory. 'On both sides of the Somme [we] threw the enemy back with counter-attacks. He suffered heavy losses.'[38]

These were among the crassest in a war of lies. By 10 August, Ludendorff already believed 'we have suffered a severe defeat' and told the Kaiser that the 'war must be ended'. Young Germans would go to their deaths for three more months, killing other young men in the process, believing that the army in which they fought was invincible. In this their faith was buoyed by the *Berliner Tageblatt*'s Generalleutnant Baron v. Ardenne, who sought to 'prove' that the German Army had stabilized its position, while playing down the impact of the tanks. While a tank attack was 'something stupefying and demonic [that] could frighten superstitious souls', German soldiers always 'overcame this surprise [and] fought like lions'. There had been, it was true, 'painful losses in territory, guns and prisoners', but the enemy offensive had been 'contained and consequently has not attained dangerous significance'. Since this offensive 'was mostly carried out by divisions from the dominions, Australian and Canadian', was this not proof that the English and French were so exhausted that they were now forced to use colonials for the difficult fighting? On 12 August, a brazenly mendacious communiqué with Ludendorff's name, appeared under a heading 'The new attack on the Western Front beaten off'.

> On the battlefront, the enemy launched a violent attack to the north of the Somme and between the Somme and Lihons in the early morning hours... On both sides of the Amiens – Roye road we turned back enemy attacks. Between the Avre and the Oize strong attacks by the enemy lasted until nightfall. They were completely defeated. The French suffered especially heavy losses near Tilloloy.[39]

Inspired and misled by the communiqués issuing from OHL, dispatches by German correspondents were now beginning to take on a surreal tone.

> Enemy losses have piled up in increasing masses. Especially yesterday and the day before... Peace returned this morning. One cannot doubt that [these losses] will be replaced... We can only wish that they suffer the same losses as in the last days, and may look forward to the outcome of this 'greatest battle of the whole war' with the fullest confidence.[40]

On 13 August, Hindenburg and Ludendorff met with the German chancellor and foreign minister. Ludendorff made it clear that 'we were not in the position to win the war militarily' and the foreign minister, von Hintze, agreed that 'our earlier intentions must give way to peace negotiations'. Still the lies poured forth. So grave had been the enemy's losses that an *en masse* entry of Americans onto the battlefield would be unable to make up the shortfall. Since 8 August, German troops had been constantly victorious, even while in retreat! It was unclear from the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* whether the mastermind behind this feat was Ludendorff or Hindenburg.

> The chief who handles his armies as though playing, by supple methods in which changes are made suddenly to meet the circumstances, this chief is master of the situation. For the capable chief, there is no changing fortune of arms, only the art of war adapted to circumstances. Our new defensive *victory* [emphasis added] has just proven this chief correct.[41]

The List Regiment was accustoming itself to a new commander, Tubeuf having begun his steady climb up the career ladder. It was now the task of Colonel Maximilian von Baligrand to preside over the three-month-long retreat of an exhausted and half-starved regiment in an army on its last legs. On 15 August, the regiment was engaged in a skirmish near Cambrai. From there, it was dispatched in the direction of Bapaume. The British had by now lost most of their tanks, either knocked out or broken down, but as a recompense the Allies possessed mastery of the air; all along the Bapaume road the men were confronted by 'metal vultures diving through the air and seeking their victims'. At Bapaume between 25 and 27 August the regiment took part in its last pitched battle of the war, a futile attempt to save that town from English and *New Zealand* troops – *not* as in Baligrand's account, Australians.

> Gun smoke and artificial fog lies over the forward battle-zone, the air is filled with gas and pitch-black clouds of smoke... Hand-to-hand combat begins [as] murderous artillery fire sets in over the position. Fog, gas and explosive shells hiss through the air like a whirlwind, in no time the terrain is covered in a single, opaque cloud. The English thrust forward out of Biefvillers...

> With hand grenades in the belt, assault packs and rifles slung over their shoulders [a Bavarian] company runs towards the Bapaume road, man after man. The company has already broken through [when] its leader falls from two bullets in the chest. Death also claims [his] battle orderly from the bullets of the Australians. An English commander, who has studied in Heidelberg, saves lieutenant Rombach from certain death and the anger of his Australians, bandages him personally and leaves him on a stretcher to be saved.[42]

By 1 September 1918, Bapaume and Péronne were in British hands. A German communiqué of 2 September reported how 'the enemy, who had attacked since the early morning in great strength, was brought to a standstill along the line Sailly – St. Pierre-Vaast-wood'. It was noted, in passing, that Mont St Quentin, a suburb of Péronne, had been 'occupied by the enemy'. Headlines in the *Figaro* that day announced 'The Australians in Péronne'.[43]

In the futile attempt to save Bapaume, the List Regiment lost 700 men. Not all could be replaced, and those who were, according to Hitler, were supplanted by men of such poor quality 'that their arrival meant, not a reinforcement but a weakening of our fighting spirit... As everywhere, the poison of the hinterland began, here too, to be effective. And the younger recruit fell down completely – for he came from home.' By this time Monash had calculated that the company strength of the German infantry on the Western Front was 'only 410,000'. Still, there was no hint of desperation in German reporting. Ludendorff, granting an interview to a Hungarian correspondent, was 'glad' that his visitor had 'gained a good impression of our troops, who've been in heavy fighting for months'. Ludendorff dismissed the ability of the Americans to provide 'significant help in men and material'. 'We were ready for the Russian steamroller [and] will be ready for America. Our will to victory remains unbroken and we will break the destructive will of the enemy.'German newspapers still maintained that the army was invincible and defeat inconceivable. A month after the 'black day', the *Morgen-Post* described the post-8 August retreat 'a masterpiece in the history of war'. The Germans had not 'retired with pleasure voluntarily; it would be mad to pretend so. But militarily it was the only thing to do. Even, as must surely be expected, this has to continue to the Siegfried [Hindenburg] positions and beyond, we have no need to be anxious.'[44]

By early October 1918, the List Regiment had returned to where it had all begun. 'Now, in the fall of 1918', Hitler wrote, 'we stood for the third time on the storm site of 1914. The little city of Comines where we had then rested had now become our battlefield.' During the night of 13 October, 'the English gas attack on the southern front before Ypres burst loose; they used yellow-cross [mustard] gas', adding, incorrectly – since mustard gas had been used against them at Third Ypres – that its 'effects were still unknown to us'.

> On a hill south of Wervick, we came . . . into several hours of barrage with gas shells, which continued all night more or less violently. As early as midnight, a number of us passed out, a few of our comrades forever. Towards morning I, too, was seized with pain which grew worse every quarter hour, and at seven in the morning I stumbled and tottered back with burning eyes; taking with me my last report of the War.[45]

Hitler wrote thus in 1924. The same year, at his trial following the Munich beer-hall putsch of 1923, he offered a similar account, but with one significant difference. In answer to the (loaded) question, 'Were you once wounded and did you suffer heavily during a gas attack?', Hitler replied, 'Yes. Surely, I was affected by German yellow-cross gas and was almost blind for a while. Later my condition improved, but with regards to my profession of architect I saw myself as a complete crippled and never believed that I would ever again be able to read a newspaper.'[46]

The question, posed by the sympathetic president of the court, allowed Hitler the opportunity of mentioning his war service. His reply that it was a *German* gas attack that brought him low contradicts *Mein Kampf* but is no less believable for that. It offers an apparent insight into why this most ruthless of warlords would never countenance the use of gas – a weapon whose drifting clouds were subject to the pattern of weather changes – even in the most desperate situations of the Second World War. His fear, in 1918, that the effects might be permanent was common enough among soldiers blinded by gas, but where a more humane person might first mourn the loss of the sight of loved ones, friends, favoured environments, physical beauty or the pleasures of nature, Hitler is concerned that he may no longer be able to draw plans or *read newspapers*. Former comrades Ignaz Westenkircher, Heinrich Lugauer and Johann Raab subsequently confirmed Hitler's version of events that night and all were repatriated with him to the same hospital at Pasewalk near Stettin. None commented, however, on the possibility that they might have been the victims of friendly fire.[47]

Hitler's experience in Pasewalk became a centrepiece in *Mein Kampf*. It was here that he 'was fated to experience the greatest villainy of the century'. In the first week of November 'I had been getting along better. The piercing in my eye sockets was diminishing; slowly I succeeded in distinguishing the broad outlines of the things about me.' And then: 'On November 10, the pastor came to the hospital for a short address: now we learned everything.'

> Again everything went black before my eyes; I tottered and groped my way back to the dormitory, threw myself on my bunk, and dug my burning head into my blanket and pillow . . .
>
> I nearly lost heart for a moment, the voice of my conscience thundered at me: Miserable wretch, are you going to cry when thousands are a hundred times worse off than you! . . . Only now did I see how all

personal suffering vanishes in comparison with the misfortune of the Fatherland...

What was all the pain in my eyes compared to this misery?...
I, for my part, decided to go into politics.[48]

EPILOGUE: THE GREATEST COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF ALL TIME

A few inhabitants of Fromelles and Fournes hold childhood memories of Hitler's return in 1940. They recall a motorcade making its way down the Aubers road and stopping, while the leader alighted to inspect an old Great War blockhouse (known to this day as the *blockhaus du fuehrer*). At Fournes, Hitler led the way to what had once been Black Mary's and the nearby Art-Nouveau bandstand where, on Sunday afternoons, the List Regiment's band played excerpts from the 'Merry Widow' or *Der Rosenkavalier*. The party also visited the local German war-graves cemetery, where Hitler saluted the graves of Bavarians who fell in May 1915 and July 1916.[1]

Hitler's 1940 battlefield excursion was part of a grand tour of defeated France, of which an early morning visit (in the company of Albert Speer and the official Nazi sculptor Arno Breker) to the architectural monuments of Paris was the highlight. Court photographer Heinrich Hoffmann turned Hitler's excursion into a profitable propaganda set piece. The cover of the first edition (600,000) of his *Mit Hitler im Westen* shows Hitler posing in front of the Eiffel Tower, while other more deceptive pictures suggest that the warlord was leading from the Front during the French campaign. *Mit Hitler im Westen* is not confined to images of Hitler. Other pictures (by anonymous war photographers) show a triumphant Wehrmacht putting the Allies to rout. On the back cover bedraggled Tommies and *poilus* trudge into captivity, as an evident counterpoint to images of Hitler addressing the Reichstag and greeting Göring after his return to Berlin. Hoffmann's book is part travelogue, part propaganda. Its subject is the resolution of unfinished business from 1918, as is made clear in a foreword by Field marshal Keitel.

> On the day of the summer solstice in the wood of Compiègne, the Führer erased the disgrace of the Armistice of 9 November 1918. Again I was permitted to be at [his] side during this unique victory campaign of

> our Wehrmacht... not only to seek out the battlefields on which our soldiers have been victorious in this war, but also those on which German men fought and died in the World War of 1914–1918.
>
> Keitel, Generalfeldmarschall *und Chef des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht.*[2]

Emphasizing Keitel's point, Hitler is shown at Fromelles, Vimy Heights and other sites where the List Regiment fought. Two of the most telling images, placed together on a page, were taken in Fournes. At the top, over the caption *Im Quartier 1916*, a group photograph shows Hitler and other dispatch runners seated in front of a wall. Below it, in a photo from 1940 set in front of the same wall, Hitler stands with his former sergeant major, now Reichsleiter Amann, and former dispatch runner Ernst Schmidt.[3]

Hitler and his propagandists were ever fond of stressing his 'origins in the battlefields'. Aside from the preposterous sub-claim that he looked after his intellectual needs and education lugging volumes of Schopenhauer around in his kitbag, the point is hardly contestable. It is inconceivable that anyone might have survived four years of front-line service during '*the* great seminal catastrophe of this [20th] century' without being manifestly changed by the experience. Indeed, the battle-hardened and bitter veteran of Pasewalk in November 1918 bore little superficial resemblance to the chauvinist who had joined the throng in the Munich *Odeonsplatz* in August 1914. Even in 1914, Hitler possessed the fundamentals for his future political Weltanschauung, but having a creed and being eager to argue politics are not the same as being prepared to devote one's life, through a political party, to the implementation of an ideology. Hitler, aged 25 in 1914, already felt, like many young men, that he was destined for greater things. Years later Herr Popp, his landlord, claimed that he had recognized Hitler's potential from the start and Hitler's early war letters bear testament to his political involvement. Yet, Hitler was still a political dilettante in 1914, who saw his destiny, as best as we can measure, in a career as an architect. In the trenches, his forté seems to have been political argument, although he was also happy to espouse opinions on art history, music and architecture to anyone prepared to listen.

There is no evidence to suggest that his views were ever other than *völkisch*, pan-German and in tune with those of many of the first volunteers of 1914. While these ideas were basically fixed, the war – particularly the last two years of the war – pushed him into adopting harder, more extreme positions and set in motion the transformation from political dilettante to activist. Wiedemann's opinion, expressed decades later, is interesting. Acknowledging what he saw to be Hitler's simplistic political opinions, he saw no reason to think that this corporal, 'who only really wanted to be an artist', would or could achieve or be interested in achievements in the political realm. Wiedemann was an educated man, an officer and perhaps a snob, observant of but uninterested in the political chit-chat of dispatch runners, some of whom were absorbed in what Hitler had to

say. During his sojourn in Germany after the Battle of the Somme in 1916, Hitler may have began to toy with the idea of politics, but professing to despise politicians (he never considered himself to be one) it is still doubtful whether he gave much thought to the idea of a future political career. Why should he? According to the newspapers, Germany was winning the war and, despite the machinations of Jews and leftist traitors, a German defeat, to Hitler, was unthinkable. After the war the enemies within – as he had suggested in the letter to Hepp in 1915 – would be dealt with. In a victorious, revitalized Germany, he would be free to follow an artistic and architectural career.

What is probably the most eventful and influential period in Hitler's first great war – the three months before his becoming aware in Pasewalk of the armistice – is the interval least and worst documented. By then Mend had long gone, Wiedemann had been promoted and transferred, and more recently, both Brandmayer and Meyer had been repatriated home. Even had they been able to bear witness to these last months of the war, how would they have dealt with it? To read the official version of this period, a glorious regiment was continuing to add new honour pages to its record. The German and Bavarian official histories, concerned to justify the conduct of the German Army as a whole and mostly committed to the Dolchstoss legend, tend to describe these months in similar terms. As for the German press (largely dependent on misinformation from OHL), its reporting, unwittingly perhaps, left its people unprepared for the November defeat. As Winston Churchill put it concerning the Dolchstoss fable, the German people had proven themselves 'worthy of better explanations'.

> For four years Germany fought and defied the five continents of the world by land and sea and air. The German armies upheld her tottering confederates, intervened in every theatre with success, stood everywhere on conquered territory, and inflicted on their enemies more than twice the bloodshed they suffered themselves. To break their strength and science and curb their fury, it was necessary to bring all the greatest nations of mankind into the fight against them.[4]

Nevertheless, German front-line soldiers who experienced the last demoralizing months on the Western Front and could still, subsequently, give credence to the Dolchstoss fable must almost have been in a state of collective and selective amnesia. Hitler, the 'poor observer', was such a victim. He continued to serve in a decimated regiment constantly harassed and constantly retreating, in which troops were falling away like flies from enemy action, malnutrition or disease, and in which their replacements, by Hitler's own admission, were of such poor quality and motivation and so defeatist in mood as to be virtually useless. Could he believe that the state of his regiment was untypical of the army as a whole; that this was not an army on the verge of defeat but an invincible force that could only lose the war by a Dolchstoss?

Did he really have to believe in the Dolchstoss? Fact or fable, was it political manna from heaven for a racist right-wing demagogue with a chip on his shoulder and an enviable war record? While it is impossible to doubt the degree and intensity of his desire to fulfil his destiny, one must question the purity of Hitler's decision to enter political life, particularly since, in the depressed environment of 1919, his chances of finding work in a famous architect's atelier – which had always been negligible – were non-existent. Even then, Hitler was hardly more qualified to be a politician than an architect. Had he joined an established political party, he could hardly have risen far in its ranks. Despite tales of Red Hitler, is it conceivable that this petit bourgeois nationalist would throw in his lot with the internationalists he believed had betrayed Germany? Nor was there much scope for a Great War corporal of plebeian speech and manners in existing radical right-wing movements like the National Bolsheviks; a movement as elitist as the pan-German League and dominated by former officers. While arguing against the existence of political parties, if Hitler was to fulfil his destiny he must first become the leader of a small right-wing party of losers and malcontents. That the former corporal succeeded in turning the embryonic NSDAP into a mass movement is history.

Hitler's apparent inability to rise above the rank of corporal in the Great War has been used to imply failings as a soldier, or character flaws that forbade further promotion. In assigning fanciful and speculative reasons for his inability to achieve further promotion, his political enemies in the pre-1933 years were making a tactical error. As a former corporal, Hitler could claim to be a true son of the people. By demeaning his rank, his critics ignored the fact that an army is made up principally of common soldiers who never achieve promotion at all, even to corporal, and that some of them are entitled to wear, like Hitler, their nations' most prestigious awards for valour. Had he become an officer, Hitler would automatically have lost much of his common touch, making it questionable whether he would ever have been able to lead a mass party which, as part of its image, disowned the old class-based prejudices of imperial Germany and its armies. Hitler's post-war image of a common soldier but uncommon war hero (not many men survived four years of front-line service with two Iron Crosses), who brought the qualities of the *Fronterlebnis* into political life, was a potent one. During the late 1920s and the early 1930s, anti-fascists and democrats worked with the knowledge that of all Germany's political leaders, Hitler – because and not in spite of his lack of promotion – was most able to tap into the discontent of disaffected war veterans or others, too young to serve in the war, who had been able to find a place for themselves in the *Freikorps*. By the mid-1920s these men had no other meaningful 'career' than that of soldier or freebooter, and began late in the decade to gravitate to the paramilitary SA in alarming numbers.

While the *völkisch* press exalted him as a war hero and patriot, his left-wing and liberal enemies were prepared to grasp at straws. Without a trace of evidence, it was suggested that he had been a coward, shirker or draft dodger. In pursuing these lines, his enemies had not counted on the solidarity of the *Fronterlebnis*.

Former List Regiment comrades, card-carrying Communists and Social Democrats among them, now testified to his qualities as a soldier. Wartime slackers, cowards or veterans tainted by left-wing or internationalist ideals could not become post-war army protégés, attend anti-Bolshevik courses at Munich university, or be employed as secret agents by the *Reichswehr*'s press and propaganda section – all of which Hitler managed. In the early 1920s former List Regiment officers freely described him as a man who 'never let us down and was particularly suited to the kind of task that could not be entrusted to other runners'; or as being 'mentally very much all there and physically fresh, alert and hardy. His pluck was exceptional, as was the reckless courage with which he tackled dangerous situations and the hazards of battle.' Hitler provided a 'shining example to those around him', displaying 'pluck [and] exemplary bearing throughout each battle', and impressing by 'his admirable unpretentiousness', which earned him 'the respect of superiors and equals alike'.[5]

The loyalty and devotion of front-line veterans to their wartime units is a byword, not least in Germany. Former Listers reacted angrily to attacks on their most famous comrade, not merely because they were untrue, but because they were a slur on the honour of the regiment. Mend, Brandmayer and Meyer all took space in their memoirs to refute this slander. Mend turned his defence into such cynical hagiography that the future Führer fumed at the over-inflated nature of his claims. Brandmayer, 'free from [political] attachments', was more reasoned if no less anti-Semitic. Noting (in 1930) that 'ambiguity still reigns everywhere' over Hitler's 'frontline activities', he sought to describe 'Hitler as he was in reality [in] a purely objective, simple and truthful' account. Whenever he read a newspaper in which 'Hitler is either discredited, mocked or slandered, revulsion seizes me'.

> It is said: 'Hitler only carried on around the base.' Who says or writes that, either has experienced or learnt nothing of the war or is a confirmed liar, in order to sully the honour of the great man. The 'base corps' carried on far from the fighting well behind the Front in the brothel-town Lille and in Gent. The greatest percentages of base-warriors were indisputably the Sons of Israel.[6]

Adolf Meyer, writing after Hitler came to power, was also concerned to repudiate 'liars' who should have 'considered that a great number of Hitler's regimental comrades could be found at any time as crown witnesses to refute vile suspicions'. Meyer cited Michel Schleehuber, a former comrade and card-carrying Social Democrat who, while 'completely distanced from Hitler politically', in 1932 testified that he had always been 'a good soldier and irreproachable comrade'. He had never seen 'Hitler in any way shirk service or avoid danger' and it astounded him to read 'unfavourable comments about Hitler's performance as a soldier in the newspapers', a 'judgement' he was prepared to make 'because I treasure Hitler as a war-comrade highly'.[7]

With so much of the Hitler programme open to reasoned criticism and ridicule, his enemies were ill advised to attack the Führer-in-waiting on his strongpoint. Lies spread by political opponents were easily refuted and left open the possibility that other criticisms of the man and his programme might also be unjustified. In a society which had become Prussianized – where for over a 100 years the great soldier and the great man had been synonymous – a soldier's war record was not something to trifle with. Hitler's opponents did so at their peril. Given the devotion of many Germans to the still evident and 'honourable' militarist creed, theirs was not yet a society where it was widely possible to acknowledge that a good soldier and devoted comrade might also be a sociopath, an evil megalomaniac and a criminal. After 1933, Hitler's war record was no longer a subject for public scrutiny. It was now what Dr Josef Goebbels said it was. Still, the lies had not ended: Hitler himself did nothing to prevent Goebbel's fanciful version of how he won his EK1 being taught in schools. Even after the Nazis achieved power, dangerous rumours still spread that this EK1 had not been 'won' in the field of battle, but as part of a 'rotten swindle' cooked up by Hitler and Amann. The idea that a corporal could conspire with a sergeant major to have the former awarded an EK1 in the German Army of 1914–18 is too far-fetched to consider, but the truth – that the commendation was made by a Jew – was not something Hitler or the NSDAP wanted known.[8]

Attempts to discredit Hitler's war service were not confined to speculation about Iron Crosses or limited promotion, for it was also suggested that Hitler was no proper soldier at all, 'merely' a dispatch runner. While a dispatch runner rarely endured the long-term suffering of day-to-day life in the trenches, it was, as Meyer (himself an infantry company commander) explained, 'frequently the case that company runners had to move under the heaviest enemy fire in open country', running risks largely unknown to ordinary infantrymen. It is a measure of the dangers involved that by the armistice only one of the regimental dispatch runners of 1914–15, Schmidt, was still actively serving. As far as Hitler's military career is concerned, it is unlikely that he could have developed his understanding of tactical cause and effect as a corporal serving four years in the trenches. Yet of all non-commissioned soldiers, a dispatch runner, liaising between headquarters and the men at the Front, is often in a unique position to observe and follow the ebb and flow of battle. This 'poor observer' obviously had a good eye for battlefield dangers and the lay of the land, so good that 'under no circumstances [would] the regimental staff want to lose Adolf Hitler as a company runner'.[9]

Wiedemann's string-pulling to prevent Hitler's transfer to a crack Bavarian unit in 1916–17 suggests how much he valued the services of his favourite orderly, but he was not among those who thought Hitler should have been promoted. As he made clear from the dock during one of the Nuremberg trials of 1946–47, Wiedemann felt Hitler lacked many of the qualities expected from a senior NCO or junior subaltern. In response to the question from the chief prosecutor, Professor Kempner, 'You were Adolf Hitler's superior in the war. Can you tell us

why he was not promoted beyond corporal?', Wiedemann replied, 'Because we could not discover any outstanding leadership qualities in him'.

> 'Therefore, because he did not have a leader-personality!' Kempner finished the interrogation amidst the laughter of all present – including the accused . . . How I had answered Kempner was true however. From a military viewpoint Hitler at that time had none of the stuff of a superior officer [his] bearing was careless and his answer, when one asked him something, was anything but militarily brief. Most of the time his head was inclined lop-sidedly towards his left shoulder.[10]

Not all Hitler's peers were that impressed either. In the 1930s, by which time Hitler had already become chancellor and Wiedemann his personal adjutant, the latter met up with Weiss Jackl. The former dispatch runner was now a village mayor in an upper Bavarian hop-growing district.

> When he [Jackl] asked me: 'Captain sir, did you have any idea at that time, when Hitler was still an orderly with us, that something outstanding would come out of him? I tried to draw myself out of the situation diplomatically – I was still Hitler's adjutant: 'You were clearly much closer to him than I, did you notice something?' 'Nah, he sometimes gave us political lectures', Weiss Jackl answered. 'Sure we would have thought that he might someday become a Bavarian provincial politician, but Reich chancellor – never!'[11]

Since Weiss Jackl had last seen him in the war, Hitler had transformed himself. Wiedemann first became aware of this in the early 1920s. On learning that Hitler was to address a meeting, he asked a former List Regiment officer whether this could be '*our* Hitler for he can't speak at all!' 'It's our Hitler', was the reply, 'you wouldn't recognize him. He appears quite elegant, has trimmed his moustache and conducts public meetings. And he always gets the applause of the masses, whenever he wants it!' Shortly afterwards Wiedemann met the new Hitler.

> That he'd become another man in the meantime was apparent at first glance. He wore his moustache in that way which later was caricatured throughout the world [but] displayed a confident manner. The way in which he spoke to me reminded me no more of the earlier, somewhat unmilitary dispatch runner; this was now a man who in between times had made something out of himself and had become more accustomed to giving orders than receiving them.[12]

The Lucky Linzer's experiences in the Great War and the belief in his own destiny made him a high-stakes political gambler in the 1930s and conditioned

the manner in which he, as supreme warlord, would fight the Second World War. Hitler regarded himself as a military genius and was sure that his experiences in the Great War gave him a vital edge over even the most able staff officer. There were some at Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) who agreed with him. Major General Walter Scherff, a Nazi general who saw himself as the Treitschke of the Third Reich, described Hitler as 'the greatest military commander and head of state of all time [a] leader of armies, a strategist and a man to inspire unshakeable confidence'. At his own trial at Nuremberg in 1946, Field Marshal Keitel remained an unabashed admirer, claiming of Hitler that it was 'impossible to prove any error on his part... I must admit openly that I was the pupil and not the master.' Less besotted generals saw him in a less flattering light. After 1942, Hitler's Great War experiences encouraged him to forbid 'even the temporary evacuation of conquered territory or to weaken secondary fronts and theatres in favour of sectors where a positive decision might possibly have been achieved'. He persisted 'in the view deriving from his experiences in the Great War that the generals' one idea was to give ground'. A former OKW officer, Johann Graf (Count) Kielmannsegg, offered this assessment of Hitler as supreme commander.

> Hitler was first of all what one would call a military dilettante. He was very much shaped by his experiences in the Great War, in which he was without doubt a brave soldier. Hitler was well aided at times with his knowledge of and rapid memory for a mass of military detail and thus could discuss many military matters. Hitler had ideas, which in an operational respect were in part not all that bad. However, he completely closed his eyes to obstacles, restrictions and problems. He believed that everything could be compensated for through ideology [by] the National Socialist spirit of his troops, which was of course complete nonsense.[13]

According to Ulrich de Maizière, another staff officer, the German campaign for the Caucuses and Stalingrad demonstrated 'the greatest weaknesses of Hitler the Commander-in-Chief'. 'He lacked any feel for logistics in war. Consequently, his operational aims and his decisions became increasingly unrealistic. They were opposed to reality and demanded so much too much of the troops that negative consequences were unavoidable.' Wiedemann, in summing up the military career of a man he knew better than most, wrote:

> Hitler can only completely be understood when one considers his military development. He was basically, as strange as it sounds, of a soldierly nature. In 1914 he volunteered immediately and loved soldiering, a brave and reliable dispatch runner... He, who previously had led the life of a bohemian, uncertain and disordered, submitted himself without protest to the hard discipline of the soldier's life and even found pleasure in it.

> Later as Reich chancellor, he spoke gladly and proudly of his memories as a soldier. I never heard of a word of criticism from him about what he had experienced as a simple soldier. He retained this preference for the military life even when he was leader of the Party and the German people. Amman, the former regimental clerk, rightly told me when I saw him again in 1933: 'Hitler is first and foremost a soldier.'[14]

In Wiedemann's view, Hitler had 'considerable military abilities'. Without Hitler's urging 'the motorization of the German Army would not have been so rapid and would not have undertaken so completely'. In ordering the offensive in 1940, Hitler 'better assessed the inner weakness of France than the military'. He thus decided 'to abandon the old Schlieffen Plan, with its insistence of a strong right wing and instead thrust through the middle of the Ardennes'. Hitler was so impressed with a Soviet tank captured in the Spanish Civil War that he urged (unsuccessfully) the design and mass construction of similar machines. Yet with all his insights and intuition, mitigating against his desire to become 'the greatest commander-in-chief of all time', were weaknesses that could not be glossed over.

> Hitler had little understanding of the work of the general staff. During the war of 1914–18 he had always been at the Front [and] had little idea of how a higher command worked. He thus over-valued the frontline soldier and believed that courage alone sufficed to win a war... Furthermore, the general staff was, in Hitler's opinion, reactionary, not merely in political respects, above all on military-technical questions.[15]

There can be no doubt how his Great War experiences influenced his military conduct and decisions in the subsequent war. Hitler's ambition, however, was not restricted to a place in history as the greatest military commander of all time. He saw himself as a new Alexander or Napoleon; as the creator and first ruler of an empire that would not founder as theirs had done, but would endure for a 1,000 years. This imperial vision was predicated on two interrelated assumptions: Germany's political and military hegemony over Europe (which would include the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the East) and the elimination of Jews from the European continent. Since either or both of the aims can be found in the pre-1914 writings of Class and Bernhardi (to name just two), how much his Great War experiences altered or added to Hitler's political attitudes and anti-Semitism is in question. Yet it does seem inconceivable that he was after 1918, as has been suggested, a political opportunist who flirted with Social Democracy and even Marxism. The idea appears based on a few quotes from his enemies. In 1941 a certain Captain Karl Mayr, with whom Hitler had collaborated immediately after the war, asserted:

> After the Great War he [Hitler] was just one of many thousands of soldiers on the streets and were looking for work... At this time, Hitler was ready to accept a position from anyone who was disposed to be friendly towards him... He would have just as gladly worked for a French or Jewish client as for an Aryan. When I met him for the first time, he resembled a tired stray-dog looking for its master.[16]

In May 1919 Mayr, a confirmed anti-Semite and bitter opponent of the Weimar Republic, had taken over the leadership of a Bavarian army propaganda group and began a search for like-minded officers, NCOs and soldiers, Hitler among them. By 1941, Mayr had long fallen out with Hitler, and his criticisms of Hitler's political integrity and racist credentials would lead to Mayr's death in a concentration camp. Similar statements about Hitler's early post-war pragmatism also emerged at the opposite end of the political spectrum. A left-wing newspaper of 1932 claimed, 'Hitler did not identify Marxism as a false doctrine or the downfall of the German people as he would have us believe today. He was literally saying to his comrades: "I stand linked to the SPD Party Secretariat, in order to join the Propaganda Department."'[17]

Material of this kind also possibly motivated Guido Knopp (in a television series of the 1990s) to present Hitler as an opportunist seeking a party, any party, in which he could construct a political home base. Knopp even presented a grainy and fuzzy strip of film showing war veterans marching through Munich in 1919, Hitler supposedly among them, in which they appear to wear hammer and sickle armbands. The person singled out *might* be Hitler, and what appear as armbands *might* bear insignias. Yet even assuming Hitler was parading with left-wing veterans from his old regiment, what does this prove? At that time he was working for the *Reichswehr* and his 'presence' suggests no more than a fact-finding mission for his political and military masters. Almost as unthinkable as 'Red Hitler' is the idea that he was a passive anti-Semite, who embraced radical anti-Semitism after the Great War out of political expediency. The suggestion that the genocide of 6,000,000 Jews was initiated not by Hitler, but by someone else who *was* a true anti-Semite, is floated, not surprisingly perhaps, by David Irving. Thus, the real 'criminal behind the "final solution" or the "Holocaust," whatever it was [the] man who started it in motion [was] undoubtedly Dr. Goebbels'. Knopp is also among those who feel that evidence for 'whether [Hitler] was already a radical anti-Semite during the Great War' remains 'unconvincing'. To make his point, he notes that 'among his war comrades, none remember anti-Semitic tirades by Hitler'; these same comrades who tell us that, as early as 1915, Hitler was holding forth on Jewish-Marxist Masonic world plots in the house of Black Mary to anyone who would listen! Among former List Regiment veterans, Wiedemann is the only one to express surprise at Hitler's radical anti-Semitism. 'Where the source of Hitler's fanatical anti-Semitism lay I never found out. His experiences with Jewish officers in the World War could have contributed little

to it.' In support, Wiedemann ignored the contempt Hitler displayed towards Gutmann and concentrated on the respect and kindness he allegedly showed, after the war, to former Jewish officers. Perhaps by the time of writing (1964) Wiedemann was keen to explain his own seduction. If Hitler could be shown as less an anti-Semite than history has demonstrated, then Wiedemann's errors of judgement might perhaps be excusable.[18]

Is it conceivable that for the first 30 years of his life Hitler might *not* have been an anti-Semite? Anti-Semitism provided cornerstones for both the Austro pan-Germanism of his youth and the Reich pan-Germanism to which he was exposed, after 1913, in Munich. To be a pan-German and not be anti-Semitic is hardly conceivable. The downtrodden lower working-class *Ostjuden* that Hitler was exposed to in Vienna, and regarded with apparent contempt, were scarcely present in Munich, though the tendency for Bavarian Jews to be middle class meant that they were highly likely to be officers. Anti-Semites like Hitler, Mend and Brandmayer – encouraged by parliamentary and military enquiries into Jewish participation in the war – saw this as sure evidence that the Jews knew how to look after one another and would further their interests at the expense of worthier Gentile soldiers. There were absolutely no grounds for such prejudice. Jews were not numerically prominent in prewar Munich, yet those who did join the List Regiment fought bravely and more than pulled their weight. As well as Gutmann (who, Wiedemann attests, was a brave and capable officer), the regimental doctor Kohn won the highest Bavarian award for devotion to medical duties in the field, while a ferocious and much-decorated storm-troop leader, Lieutenant Kuh, an artist in civilian life, was also Jewish and credited with saying that there was nothing more beautiful than 'the night before an assault!' In this respect at least, Kuh was a man after Hitler's own heart. Whether he endorsed Hitler's brutal social-Darwinist view of war as racial hygiene is another question. Hitler, as late as 1941, was telling acolytes that a peace lasting 'more than twenty-five years is harmful to a nation. Peoples, like individuals, sometimes need regenerating by a little bloodletting.' For the good of the German people it was therefore necessary to have 'a war every fifteen or twenty years'.[19]

Thinking of this kind had become unfashionable after the bloodbaths of the Great War, but before 1914, Class, Treitschke, Bernhardi and most social-Darwinists had argued similarly. Nor was the idea peculiarly German; in 1912 such diverse characters as Italian futurist poets and artists and Australia's future prime minister could all be found endorsing the idea that war alone provided the racial purification without which a people or nation must go under. Totalitarian rulers might also have the right to be anxious that an army without a war to fight might be tempted to organize *coups d'état*, though Hitler in 1941 had little to fear. He still had worlds to conquer and racial projects to pursue, particularly in the East, which could keep an army busy for decades. As a true pan-German he claimed that even in 1914, while 'many people thought we ought to look towards the mineral riches of the West... I always thought that having the sun in the East was the essential thing for us.' Even then, he was responding to the pan-German

idea that Russia was the main enemy of Germandom, its people *Untermenschen*, their lands German by right of future conquest. Such ideas, as Fritz Fischer confirms, 'whatever one might sometimes read to the contrary [were] by no means peculiar to Hitler'.

> In this respect the latter was, in fact, very much a product of the pre-Great War era [for] the idea of the inevitable racial struggle between Slav and Teuton and the concept of Lebensraum [were] already in common use before the Great War. All these ideas had a currency that was by no means restricted to the Pan-German movement.[20]

Nevertheless, some historians still describe Hitler's *Lebensraum* 'conversion' as a 1920s phenomenon, Trevor-Roper being 'almost certain' that it was acquired under Hess's tutelage in Landsberg prison while Hitler dictated *Mein Kampf*. Otherwise, Hitler's 'grand design' for eastern Europe is well known. As his armies poured into the Soviet Union in July–August 1941, Hitler told his lackeys how he planned to 'take away' its character as an 'Asiatic steppe, we'll Europeanize it'. In 20 years the Ukraine would already be 'home for twenty million inhabitants besides the natives' and eventually 'a hundred million Germans [would be] settled in these territories'. Slavs were 'born slaves, who feel the need of a master'. Germans must 'Germanize this country by the immigration of Germans, and to look upon the natives as Redskins'. They would simply 'drive out' the Jew, 'that destroyer'.[21]

Like Class, Hitler's territorial ambitions were not confined to the East. Regions of France inhabited by people of Germanic origins were fated to be incorporated into the greater German Reich as part of the Nazi New Order, in particular the French *départements* of Nord and Pas-de-Calais, as well as Belgian Flanders. Hitler professed that 'nothing on earth would persuade us to abandon such safe positions as those on the Channel coast'. It was his absolute 'conviction that'

> Wallonia [French Belgium] and northern France are in reality German lands. The abundance of German-sounding nameplaces, the widespread customs of German origin, the forms of idiom which have persisted – all these prove, to my mind, that these territories have been systematically detached, not to say snatched, from the Germanic territories.
>
> If there are territories anywhere which we have every right to reclaim . . . it is these.[22]

His other territorial claims on France (indicative of the peace treaty the Nazis had in mind for that nation) were bizarre: 'We must further not forget that the old Kingdom of Burgundy played a prominent role in German history and that it is from time immemorial German soil, which the French grabbed at the time of our weakness.'[23]

Werner Beumelburg concluded his 1939 appeal on a high note of logic and righteousness, clearly intended to justify Germany's 25-year war.

> Twenty-five years have passed and the same powers, which at that time strove to annihilate Germany, have again risen up in order to begin their absurd work. The generation of 1914 and the generation of 1939 stand side by side, weapons to hand determined, throughout the most extreme test of soldierly virtue, to prevent a repeat of our misfortune.
>
> Never in history has a single generation of people been allowed such an experience. No generation has so earned victory as that which did its soldierly duty for four long years on the battlefield, an undying example for all those who follow...
>
> That no one may rob us of victory and that our youth may prove itself on the battlefields [in] spirit and in reality, that is our prayer.[24]

With a war on two fronts assuaged through the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, Beumelburg, like most Germans, greeted the New Year of 1940 optimistically. Their prayer seemed already to have been answered; Germany's success in what became not one of 25- or 26-year but a 30-year war was not in God's hands, but in those of the man-god that Germans were encouraged to believe was the 'greatest commander-in-chief of all time'. The events of the last five of that 30-year war are part of another and very well-known story.[25]

NOTES

1 A UNIVERSITY OF THE TRENCHES

1 *Hitler's Table Talk*, pp. 14 & 128.

2 *Hitler's Table Talk*, p. xxv.
Today Beumelburg is mostly, and deservedly, forgotten. In the Third Reich, however, his novels regularly ran to editions of 30,000 to 150,000 thousand; the total production of those listed by the Phillip Reclam Verlag of Leipzig in 1939 is over a million. His interest in history and historical myth-making was not confined to the written word, for he was soon appointed to be one of three directors-general of the National Socialist Reich Radio Chamber. Beumelburg's career in Joseph Wulf, *Presse und Funk im Dritten Reich* and Wulf, *Die bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich.*

In the Weimar period Beumelburg wrote the afore-mentioned Reichsarchiv monograph *Flandern* (on Third Ypres), as part of the same series as his *Douaumont* (on Verdun). He also wrote a Dolchstoss-inspired critique of the Versailles Treaty, *Deutschland im Ketten* (Germany in Chains).

Beumelburg, *Von 1914 bis 1939*, p. 8.

3 *Hitler's Table Talk*, p. 661.

4 Amman quoted by Wiedemann in *Feldherr*, p. 249. Trevor-Roper, 'Mind of Adolf Hitler', pp. xxxiii–xxxiv and *Table Talk*, p. 82.

5 Werner Beumelburg, *Von 1914 bis 1939*, p. 41.

6 Ibid., pp. 15, 41.

7 *Table Talk*, pp. 315, 228. Hitler cited in Hans Frank, *Im Angesicht des Galgens*, p. 46.

8 Where a young Frenchman had an 80 per cent chance of being conscripted, a German had, on average, one chance in two of being called up. Middle-class, often ardently patriotic German males were almost routinely exempted so that they might further professional careers or continue tertiary studies. Also exempted, ironically, were most of the industrial working class, on the grounds that these workers were probably infected by Social Democracy. Indeed, military authorities drew just 6 per cent of conscripts from the cities, where 40 per cent of the population lived. Official statistics by Bernhardi, *Next War*, pp. 243–44.

9 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 165.

10 Statistics in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 382–85.

11 Some 800 infantry regiments fought in the Bavarian, Saxon, Württemburg and Prussian divisions that made up the armies of the German empire for the loss of men killed of just under two million, an average of some 2,500 per regiment.

12 *Table Talk*, p. 56.

13 Manheim, translator's note in *Mein Kampf*, pp. xi–xii. Maser offered a pre-1914 Hitler reading list of Wedeking, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe, Dante, Hauptmann and Zola, and even Confucius and Buddha. Maser, *Myth & Reality*, p. 118. Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936*, p. 41. Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna*, p. 392. Speer, *Au cœur*, p. 177.
14 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, p. 36. The event is also reported in Toland, *Hitler*, p. 64.
15 According to René Mathot, Hitler had an affair with a French woman in Fournes-en-Weppes, which produced a son on 25 March 1918. Since the List Regiment and Hitler left Fournes for good in September 1916, the chronological improbability is self-evident. Was it likely that this prudish men, with his deep-seated fears of miscegenation and of women, would seek and find a sexual partner in a village from where most civilians had been evacuated in 1915? On the other hand, Lothar Machtan's Hitler is no philandering heterosexual, but a homosexual who had an open affair with his fellow dispatch runner Ernst Schmidt ('Schmidl'). As proof, Machtan cites the 'protocol' of another former comrade, Hans Mend, a 'document' that is only known in hearsay. In this, Mend is quoted as stating that Hitler, in 1915, spent his nights in Fournes fornicating with his 'male whore' (Schmidt). Mathot, *Au ravin*, p. 27. Maser, 'Vater eines Sohnes', pp. 173–202. Machtan, *Geheimnis*, p. 84. Hitler the 'loner' in Knopp and Remy (eds), *Profile*. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 75, 114.
16 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 135.
17 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, p. 82. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 179.
18 Ibid., p. 55.
19 Fischer, *Betriebsunfall*, p. 180. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 115. Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, pp. 24–29.
20 Amman quoted in Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, p. 249.

2 1913–14: THE CURATIVE POWER OF WAR

1 Class cited in Fischer Krieg der Illusionen, p. 144.
2 Bernhardi, Next war, p. 24.
3 *Mein Kampf*, pp. 145, 159. Bauer and Piper, *München*, p. 244. Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 100.
4 Benz, Graml and Weiss (eds), *Nationalsozialismus*, p. 679. Weyerer, *München 1933–1949*, pp. 117–19. Hoffmann, *Hitler Was My Friend*, pp. 16–17.
5 Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 2.
6 Film shown in Knopp and Remy, *Profile*.
7 *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 25 May 1913.
8 Wilhelm to Lord Stamfordham, cited by Röhl, 'Vorsätzlicher Krieg?' p. 214. Davidson, *Making Hitler*, p. 46. Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, p. 70.
9 *Table Talk*, p. 97. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, pp. 126–27.
10 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, pp. 3–4, 126. Bauer and Piper, *München*, p. 205.
11 Knopp, *Bilanz*, p. 120. Maser, *Legende–Mythos–Wirklichkeit*, pp. 118–22.
12 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 155. Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, pp. 73–76. Maser, *Letters and Notes*, pp. 34, 88. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 163.
13 Maser, *Letters and Notes*, p. 88.
14 Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna*, p. 401. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, pp. 126, 155. Maser, *Letters and Notes*, pp. 34, 74. Maser, *Legende–Mythos–Wirklichkeit*, pp. 118–22. Knopp, *Bilanz*, p. 120. Anna Popp in Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 77.
15 Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna*, p. 401. Police registration in Jones, *Hitler in Vienna*, p. 255. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 126.

16 Bauer and Piper, *München*, pp. 210–19. Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 77. Hale, *Captive Press*, p. 4. Manheim in Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. xi. Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna*, pp. 21–22. Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936*, p. 41.
17 Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna*, pp. 392, 200–201 and citing Christa Schroeder, p. 233. Frank, *Im Angesicht des Galgens*, p. 46. Trevor-Roper in *Hitler's Table Talk 1941–1944*, p. xxxii. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 245.
18 Bauer and Piper, *München*, pp. 210–19.
19 Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, pp. 73–76. Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, pp. 76–98. Machtan, *Geheimnis*, pp. 67–76.
20 Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, pp. 73–76.
21 Fischer, *Illusions*, pp. 161, 190–94. Manheim in Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. xii. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 10 March 1913.
22 *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 11 March 1913. *Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung*, 12 March 1913. *Vorwärts*, 11 March 1913.
23 *Post*, 25 April 1913, 28 January and 24 February 1914. Fischer, *Illusions*, p. 372. *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 26 February 1914. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 2 March 1914.
24 *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 4, 14 March 1914. *Germania*, 2, 3 March 1914. Fischer, *Illusions*, pp. 375–79. Bernhardi, 'Militärischen Lage'. 'Germanicus', 'Michel, wach' auf!', *Post*, 11 March 1914.
25 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 9 March 1914. *Vorwärts*, 14 March 1914.
26 Fischer, *Illusions*, pp. 90–94, 190–91. *Hamburger Nachrichten*, 31 November 1911.
27 Fischer, *Illusions*, p. 191 and *Illusionen*, p. 298. Churchill, *World Crisis*, pp. 105–106.
28 Trachtenberg, *History & Strategy*, p. 56. Hans von Schoen, Bavarian *chargé d'affaires* in Berlin to Count Georg Hertling, Bavarian prime minister, 18 July 1914, Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 128 and quoting Wilhelm, p. 256. *Berliner Letztenachrichtendienst*, 1 July 1914. *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung*, 9 July 1914. *Vossische Zeitung*, 12 July 1914. Churchill, *World Crisis*, p. 112. *Times*, 3, 13 July 1914.
29 In Paris, the *Figaro*'s comment that there was 'nothing to be anxious about' (written two days after the murders) captures the mood of the first week. Maurice Barrès at the *Echo de Paris* was less sanguine, warning that if the Central Powers were to risk a full-scale continental war, their timing could hardly be better. *Figaro, Echo de Paris*, 30 June 1914. Hale, *Publicity and Diplomacy*, p. viii. *Vorwärts*, 29 June 1914. *Germania, Tag, National Zeitung*, 1 July 1914.
30 Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 307. *Times*, 16 July 1914. *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 19 July 1914, cited and translated in Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 142.
31 Jagow to Lichnowsky, German ambassador in London, 18 July 1914, in Geiss, pp. 122–23, 132.
32 *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, 29 June 1914. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 10 July 1914. *Vossische Zeitung*, 12 July 1914. *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 20 July 1914. *Times*, 22 July 1914.
33 *Sozialdemokratische Korrespondenz*, 23 July 1914 in Kuczynski, *Chronik und Analyse*, p. 32.
34 An observation in the *Echo de Paris*' that the German press 'without much enthusiasm perhaps, by necessity' supports Austria is a fair summation. *Echo de Paris, Post*, 24 July 1914.
35 *Vorwärts*, 25 July 1914.
36 *Berliner Tageblatt, Kölnische Zeitung*, 24 July 1914. *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten, Kruez-Zeitung*, 26 July 1914. *Weser-Zeitung, Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, 26 July 1914.
37 Nicolson to Grey, 26 July 1914, Hollweg to Tsirschky und Bögendorff, German Ambassador in Vienna, 30 July 1914, Grey to Goschen British Ambassador in Berlin, 30 July 1914 in Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 235, 301, 305, 307. *Norddeutsche Zeitung* (Flensburg), 26, 27 July 1914.

38 *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 27 July 1914. *Times, Norddeutsche Zeitung, National Zeitung*, 29 July 1914.
39 *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger, Vossische Zeitung*, 30 July 1914. Geiss, pp. 270–71. On the day Britain *declared* war on Germany, Moltke was still assuring Jagow it was inconceivable that 'England will be willing to assist, by becoming an enemy of Germany, in destroying this civilization – a civilization in which England's spiritual culture has for ages had so large a share.' Moltke to Jagow 4 August 1914. Also Hollweg to Bögendorff, 30 July 1914, Grey to Goschen, 30 July 1914 in Geiss, *July 1914*, pp. 301, 305, 307, 357.
40 *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 31 July 1914. *Vorwärts*, 1 August 1914. *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 31 July 1914. *Vorwärts*, 1, 31 July 1914. Bavarian Socialists in *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 31 July 1914.
41 Recently, this view has come under vigorous scrutiny. Niall Ferguson accepts the presence of crowds 'but to describe their mood as simply one of "enthusiasm" or "euphoria" is misleading . . . feelings of anxiety, panic and even millenarian religiosity were equally common responses'. Ferguson, *Pity of War*, p. 177. Verhey, *The spirit of 1914*. Wolff in *Berliner Tageblatt*, 31 July 1916.
42 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, pp. 161–63. Hitler to Hepp, 5 February 1915 in Maser, *Letters and Notes*, p. 90. Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, pp. 102–107, 116.

3 CANNON FODDER

1 Hitler to Popp in Gilbert, *Great War*, p. 92. For example, 'abonnement' coupon in the *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 8 November 1914.
2 Edmonds to Bean, *AWM 38 3DRL7953*, item 34, 19 September 1927. *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 20, 27 October 1914. Gibbs, *Adventures*, p. 217. Knightley, *First Casualty*, p. 86.
3 Cummings, *The Press*, p. 24.
4 Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. xi. Varley, *The spirit of 1914*, pp. 206–207.
5 Bavarian official history, p. 4.
6 Einem in Förster, 'Military Planning', p. 466. Official figures quoted by Bernhardi show '22.34 per cent. from the small or country towns, 7.37 per cent. from the medium-sized towns, and 64.15 per cent. from the rural districts'. Bernhardi, *Next War*, p. 243–44. Hüppauf, 'Myth of the New Man', p. 72.
7 Kriegrfreiw. Sachse, 'Vom Regiment "List" ', in Peter (ed.), *Unsere Bayern*, p. 257.
8 Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, pp. 8–17.
9 Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, p. 17. Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, pp. 18–19.
10 Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, pp. 18–20.
11 Manvell and Fraenkel, *Hess*, p. 19. Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, pp. 8, 10–11, 41. Brandmayer's use of 'du' cited in Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936*, p. 634.
12 Schmidt in Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 115.
13 Later Brandmayer was forgiven and, in 1939, Hitler even helped organize a loan of 5,000 Reichsmarks for his old comrade. Schmidt's career and Brandmayer's loan in Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, pp. 115, 148. Brandmayer's problems with *Schrifttumskammer* in Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936*, p. 634. Mend's experiences in Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, pp. 87–88 and in Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 271.
14 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 11–14.
15 Ibid. *Mein Kampf*, p. 164. *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 12, 13 August 1914.
16 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 15 August 1914.
17 Gerlach, *Zeit der Lüge*, p. 74. *Münchner Neuesten Nachrichten*, 20 August 1914. *Hofer Anzeiger, München-Augsburger Abendzeitung*, 21 August 1914. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 164. *Deutschen Tageszeitung, Post*, 21 August 1914.
18 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 22 August 1914.
19 *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 September 1914. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 4 September 1914.

20 *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 3 September 1914. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 9, 14 September 1914.
21 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October 1914. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 14 September 1914.
22 General Joseph Simon Galliéni quoted by Sir James Edmonds in *October–November 1914*, p. 126.
23 *Figaro*, 11, 14 October 1914.
24 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 14 October 1914.
25 Ibid.
26 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 21 October 1914. *Times*, 15, 24 October 1914.
27 Hitler cited in 'Adolf Hitler: ils étainent cinq dans les tranchées', *Historica 1914–1918*, Bayeux October–November 1993, p. 25. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 15.
28 Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 8. Hitler to Frau Popp, Maser, *Letters and Notes*, pp. 44–47.
29 Solleder (ed.), ibid., pp. 10–11. *Table Talk*, p. 325.
30 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 16. Hitler to Popp, Maser, *Letters and Notes*, p. 50.
31 Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 12.
32 Maser, *Letters and Notes*, pp. 68–71.
33 Ibid., pp. 50, 71. Sachse, 'Vom Regiment List', in Peter (ed.), *Unsere Bayern*, p. 258. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 17.
34 Rubenhauer in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 13. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 17.
35 'Parade in Lille vor Sr. Majestät dem König Ludwig III von Bayern', in Peter (ed.), *Unsere Bayern*, p. 33.
36 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 21, 28 October 1914. Letter to Popp, Maser, *Letters and Notes*, p. 53. Rupprecht in *München–Augsburger-Abendzietung*, 27 October 1914.

4 WEST FLANDERS 1914

1 Solleder (ed), Vier Jahre Westfront, p. 32.
2 Cited in Wiedemann, Feldherr, pp. 20–21.
3 Edmonds (quoting General Galliéni) in *Military Operations France and Belgium, October–November 1914*, pp. 126, 197.
4 Ibid., p. 127.
5 Falkenhayn in Neillands, *Attrition*, p. 56. German official history, vol. 5, p. 318.
6 Asprey, *German High Command*, p. 122. Cited in Gilbert, *Great War*, p. 93.
7 *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 23, 24 October 1914. Pürkel and Ungern-Sternberg, *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*. Gilbert, *Great War*, p. 100. Delage in *Figaro*, 27 October 1914. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 26 October 1914. Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p. 33.
8 Asprey, pp. 110, 121. Bernhardi, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, pp. 396–97.
9 Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters*, p. 11.
10 *Times*, 17 October 1914.
11 Gilbert, *Great War*, pp. 92, 94.
12 *Bayern im Grossen Krieg*, p. 136. Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, pp. 18–20.
13 *Times*, 13, 15 and 24 October 1914.
14 *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 October 1914.
15 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 5 November 1914.
16 Ibid.
17 *Mein Kampf*, pp. 144–45, 181.
18 Fabeck in Gilbert, *Great War*, p. 96.
19 Letter to Hepp, 5 February 1915 in Maser, *Letters and Notes*, pp. 68–90.
20 Ibid.
21 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 19–20.
22 Ibid.
23 Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 21–22.
24 Ibid., pp. 24–27.

25 Mend's memory may have already been playing tricks. Hitler certainly could not have worn a helmet nor did he become a company runner until after his promotion to corporal and the award of his 2nd Class Iron Cross. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 24–25.
26 Ibid., pp. 28–31.
27 Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, pp. 18–20.
28 Letter to Popp 9 November 1914 in Maser, *Letters and Notes*, pp. 50–57. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 21. Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 32–33.
29 Solleder (ed.), ibid., p. 34–35.
30 Ibid., p. 32.
31 Ibid., pp. 37–38.
32 Edmonds, *Short History*, p. 73. Edmonds, *Military Operations October–November 1914*, pp. 328–29.
33 Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 38. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 26–27.
34 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, pp. 164–65.
35 Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. vii–viii. Schmidt cited in Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, pp. 128–29.
36 Bavarian official history, p. 141. *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 31 October, 1 November 1914.
37 *Mein Kampf*, pp. 165. Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, pp. 18–20. Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 40.
38 Kriegrfreiw. Sachse, 'Vom Regiment "List"', in Peter (ed.), *Unsere Bayern*, p. 259.
39 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 27, 33. Rubenbauer, 'Tage der Ruhe', pp. 59, 64. Heiden, *Fuehrer*, p. 74.
40 Rubenhauer, 'Schützengraben', pp. 65–66.
41 *Times*, 31 October 1914.
42 Ibid., 1 November 1914.
43 Hitler quoted in Knopp, *Bilanz*, p. 94. Macdonald, *1914*, p. 401.
44 Macdonald, *1914*, p. 407. Fritz Burgdörfer, 'Kämpfe mit den Engländer' and Kriegsfreiw. Sachse, 'Vom Regiment "List"', *Unsere Bayern*, pp. 144, 259.
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46 Hitler's letter and Engelhardt's statement in Heiden, *Fuehrer*, pp. 71–73.
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48 Iron Cross 1st and 2nd class awards from Rubenbauer, 'Tage der Ruhe', p. 64.
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51 Eichelsdörfer, 'Schicksalstag', pp. 77–78.
52 Letter to Munich in Heiden, *Fuehrer*, pp. 71–72.
53 Eichelsdörfer, 'Schicksalstag', p. 78.
54 *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten*, 10 November 1914.
55 *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 November 1914. *Ypres 1914*, pp. 110–11.
56 *Ypres 1914*, p. 111. *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 15 November 1914.
57 *Times*, 8 November 1914.
58 *Ypres 1914*, pp. 127–30. Solleder, 'Winter', p. 79.
59 Casualty figures from Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 382–83. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 87.
60 *Die Bayern im Großen Krieg*, p. 145.

5 WINTER 1914–15

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2 Ibid., p. 82.
3 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 40–41.
4 Ibid., pp. 24–25, 44–46.
5 Ibid., pp. 46–47.

6 Solleder, 'Winter', p. 83. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 47.
7 Solleder, Ibid., pp. 87–89.
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9 Neisser, 'Deutsche Militarismus'.
10 Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, pp. 155–56.
11 Pürkel and Ungern-Sternberg, *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*. Not all French responses to the *Aufruf* were as ludicrous as Delage's. See for example Krumeich, 'Ernest Lavisse', pp. 150–51. *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 23, 24 October 1914. Gilbert, *Great War*, p. 100. Delage in *Figaro*, 27 October 1914. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 26 October 1914.
12 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 23 October 1914. *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 October 1914.
13 Angell, *Great Illusion*, p. 325. Sombart, 'Unsere Feinde' and *Händler und Helden*. Lenger, 'Sombart als Propagandist', pp. 65–76.
14 Sombart, 'Unsere Feinde'.
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17 Ibid.
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19 Ibid.
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21 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 52. Solleder and Wenzel in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 90–91.
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23 Solleder, 'Winter', pp. 90–93.
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29 Ibid., pp. 60–61.
30 Ibid., pp. 61–62.
31 Solleder, 'Winter', pp. 79–80. Mend, Ibid., p. 62. Statistics in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 382–83. Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, p. 17.
32 Brandmayer, Ibid., p. 17.
33 Ibid., pp. 18–19.

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2 Clark, *Donkeys*, p. 72. Bavarian official history, p. 147.
3 Ibid., p. 21.
4 Clark, *Donkeys*, pp. 43–48. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 8 March 1915.
5 *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 3 August 1914. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 30 April 1915.
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8 Stephen Graham in Corfield, *Fromelles 19/20 July 1916*, p. 9.
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15 Macdonald, *1915*, p. 114.
16 Ibid.
17 Eichelsdörfer, 'Neuve Chapelle', p. 107.
18 Brandmayer, pp. 19–21.
19 Eichelsdörfer, 'Neuve Chapelle', pp. 108–11.
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21 Mend, ibid., pp. 76–77.
22 Ibid., pp. 75–80.
23 Ibid., p. 78.
24 Ibid., pp. 77–88.
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27 Ibid.
28 Bavarian official history, p. 148. Edmonds, *Winter 1914–15*, pp. 151–52.

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2 Bavarian official history, pp. 231–32.
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6 «A quoi bon tuer des Turcs? Kill Boches». Sir John French in *Figaro*, 2 August 1917. Repington, *Personal Experiences*, vol. 1, pp. 36–37.
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12 Scanzoni in Solleder, ibid., pp. 120–21; and Corfield, *Don't Forget Me Cobber*, p. 181.
13 Weiss and Solleder, ibid., pp. 122–23.
14 Solleder, ibid., p. 125. Zuckerman, *Rape of Belgium*, p. 148.
15 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 89–95.
16 Ibid.
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18 Ibid., p. 102.
19 Ibid., pp. 102–103.
20 Solleder, 'Die neue Stellung', pp. 126–28.
21 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 104–105.
22 Ibid., pp. 105–109.
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24 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, pp. 24–25.
25 Ibid.
26 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, pp. 26–27.
27 Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, p. 23.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 26.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 27.
32 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 112–15.
33 Ibid., p. 115. Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, p. 27.

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35 Ibid., pp. 135–39.
36 Solleder, 'Nach der Schlacht', p. 153.
37 Edmonds, *Aubers Ridge, Festubert, and Loos*, p. 43. German official history, p. 59.

8 NURSERY TALES OF 1915

1 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, pp. 40–42.
2 Ibid.
3 Solleder, 'Sommer in Flandern', pp. 162–67.
4 Ibid., pp. 167–72.
5 Statistics in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 381–85.
6 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, pp. 31–32, 44, 51.
7 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 128–35.
8 Ibid., pp. 136–40.
9 When Barrès's wartime *œuvre* from the *Echo de Paris* appeared as the *Chronique de la Grande Guerre* in the 1920s, it needed 14 volumes totalling almost 5,000 pages. Barrès wrote four war-related articles a week over four and a half years for the *Echo*; about two million words in all. Barrès, *Chronique*. Rolland cited in Chiron, *Barrès*, p. 344.
10 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 4 May 1915.
11 Haas, 'Der Haß'.
12 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 189.
13 Edmonds to Bean, *AWM 38 DRL7953*, item 34, 19 September 1927. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 4 May 1915.
14 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 15 March 1915.
15 Knightley, *First Casualty*, p. 84. Gibbs, *The Hope*, pp. 165–66.
16 *Alleged German Outrages... Bryce. Times*, 13 May 1915. Ponsonby, *Falsehood*, p. 81.
17 Zuckerman, *Rape of Belgium*, pp. 136–37.
18 *Times*, 15 May 1915.
19 Among Canadians, the story of the man crucified at Ypres in 1915 survived the war intact, with a sculpture depicting the 'event' being displayed in the new Canadian war memorial in 1919. The German Government protested, but British authorities produced 'the sworn testimony of two English soldiers who claimed to have seen... the corpse of a Canadian soldier fastened with bayonets to a barn door'. The tale was debunked when it was learnt that the part of the line in question was never occupied by Germans, and 'the cast was banished from the War Memorial Exhibition in Ottawa'. George Sylvester Viereck found 'No trace of the crucified soldier [in] the files of the Canadian War Office.' By then the damage had been done. Viereck, *Germs of Hate*, pp. 276–77.
20 *Times*, 13 May 1915.
21 Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, p. xii. Kramer, 'Les "atrocities allemandes"' and Horne, 'Les mains coupées', pp. 133–64. See also Kramer, 'Greueltaten', pp. 104–39. *Times*, 13 May 1915.
22 *Kölnische Zeitung*, 15 May 1915.
23 Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols', in Kaufmann (ed.), *Nietzsche*, p. 555. Bean, *Australia in the War*, vol. I, pp. xlv.
24 Jesinghaus, 'Hat Nietzsche Schuld?'.
25 Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols'; 'The Antichrist'; 'Nietzsche contra Wagner' in Kaufmann (ed.), *Nietzsche*, pp. 541, 553–55, 654–55, 669.
26 Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, p. 15.
27 Jesinghaus, 'Hat Nietzsche Schuld?'.
28 Woltmann, *Germanen und die Renaissance*, talent chart p. 147. For a French critique of 'Wolfmann [*sic*]', see 'La Théorie allemande de la guerre', *Figaro*, 23 May 1915.

29 The enthronement of chauvinistic and racist cultural values was present in Europe long before Hitler and the Nazis made it an article of policy. In 1915, intellectuals on both sides of the Rhine were writing of the superiority of *their* national art, national literature, national poetry and national philosophy, with the idea of nationality being synonymous with race. Wundt, *Die Nationen*. Conrad, 'Geist der Nationen'.
30 Conrad, 'Geist der Nationen'.
31 Wundt, *Germanen und die Renaissance*, p. 144. Conrad, Ibid.
32 Ibid., p. 113. Conrad, Ibid.

9 HUGO GUTMANN AND THE GOOD

1 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, pp. 44–46. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 141–42.
2 Brandmayer, ibid., p. 47.
3 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 145–46.
4 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, p. 48. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 143.
5 Mend, ibid., pp. 146, 155–56, 168.
6 Ibid., pp. 134, 157–58.
7 Ibid., pp. 134, 157, 165.
8 Solleder in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 196. Mend, ibid., pp. 114–15.
9 Mend, ibid., pp. 17, 108, 112–15, 141.
10 Treitschke, *History of Germany*, pp. 556–57. Picht, 'Zwischen Vaterland und Volk', p. 747. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 160–61.
11 Mend, ibid., pp. 160–61, 186–87. *Table Talk*, p. 119.
12 Machtan, *Geheimnis*, pp. 81–88. Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 145.
13 Machtan, ibid. Joachimsthaler, ibid.
14 'Mend Protocol' in Machtan, *Geheimnis*, pp. 81–88.
15 Machtan, *Geheimnis*, pp. 81–90. Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 143. Eugene Davidson also credited Gutmann with recommending Hitler's EK2. Davidson, *Making of Hitler*, p. 76.
16 Kisch, *Gesammelte Werke*, p. 299.
17 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 161.
18 Ibid., pp. 173–74.
19 Wiedemann, 'Erhöhte Tätigkeit' and 'Zweite Kriegswinter'.

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1 German official history, vol. 10, p. 407. Bavarian official history, pp. 289–91.
2 Wiedemann, 'Erhöhte feindliche Tätigkeit', pp. 211–12.
3 Ibid.
4 *War Dead and War Memorials . . . V.C. Corner*, Fromelles, p. 7.
5 Elliott, *Fleurbaix*. Melbourne, 1929. Green, 'Fleurbaix – The Mystery Battle'.
6 Liddell-Hart, *Real War*, p. 242. Corfield, *Fromelles*. Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 18–42, 214–36.
7 *AWM45* [21/7–27/6]. XI Corps Operation Orders (Haking), 9 and 17 July 1916. Report by XI Corps on operations between Fauquissart-Trivelet Road and Farme Delangre opposite Cordonnerie Farm. Butler's 'Memorandum to Kiggell', 17 July 1916 and Plumer's 15 July 'Note'. *AWM45* [21/7–27/6]. Butler's Memorandum to Kiggell, 17 July 1916. Haking's message in War Diary, 61st Division, 10–21 July 1916. Special DR, XI Corps, RHS 1146/6. Terraine, *Educated Soldier*, p. 204.
8 MacLaurin in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 July 1919. Headlam, *Guards Division*, vol. 1, pp. 106–107. Ashworth, *Live and Let Live*, pp. 90–91. Haking had already been responsible for a chaotic situation at Neuve Chapelle when his XI Corps (21 and 24

Divisions) arrived late and confused on the battlefield. Travers, *Killing Ground*, pp. 30–34, 110.
9 Stewart, *New Zealand Division*, p. 48.
10 Elliott quoted by Green, 'Fleurbaix – The Mystery Battle'. Bean, *Australia in the War*, vol. III, pp. 329–447. Tagesbefehl cited in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 231.
11 Edmonds wrote: 'See, for instance, the losses of the divisions at 2nd Ypres, all far heavier: – one over 15,000, one over 10,000, two over 7,000, two over 5,000.' Edmonds to Bean, *AWM38 3DRL7953*, item 34, 24 April 1928.
12 Wiedemann, 'Das Gefecht bei Fromelles am 19. und 20. Juli 1916', in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 214–15.
13 Ibid.
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15 Wiedemann, 'Das Gefecht bei Fromelles', in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 215.
16 Australian National Archive, service record and papers for #4840 Pte. Meyer, N. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 186. Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, p. 39.
17 Wiedemann, 'Das Gefecht bei Fromelles', in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, p. 223.
18 *Times*, 21, 22 July 1916. *Figaro*, 21 July 1916. *Sydney Morning Herald, Argus*, 22 July 1916. *Kriegschronik*, 20 July 1916.
19 *Argus, Times*, 24 July 1916. Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfron*t, p. 227. *Times, Daily Mail, Argus, et al.*, 24 July 1916.
20 Ludendorff, *Memories*, vol. II, p. 710. Gibbs, *Realities*, p. 348. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 30 July, 1 August 1916.
21 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 1 August 1916.
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11 HELL ON THE SOMME

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2 Edmonds to Bean, AWM 38 3DRL7953, item 34, 3 November 1927.
3 *251 Divisions of the German Army*, p. 139.
4 Wiedemann, 'Die Sommeschlacht', Solleder (ed.), p. 237. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 191.
5 British official figures cited in Bean, *Australia in the War*, vol. III, pp. 944–45.
6 *Times*, 1 July 1916.
7 Repington, *Personal Experiences*, vol. 1, pp. 252–53.
8 *Times*, 3, 4, and 5 July 1916.
9 *Figaro*, 4, 9 July 1916. *Times*, 6 July 1916.
10 *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 3 July 1916. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 3, 5 July 1916.
11 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 8, 10 July 1916.
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13 *AWM38 3DRL 7953*, item 34, 1 May 1928. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 14 July 1916.
14 Cummings, *The Press*, p. 24. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens*, p. 237. *Australia in the War*, vol. IV, p. 727. Gibbs cited in *Argus* (Melbourne) and *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 1916.
15 Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, p. 40.
16 Wiedemann, 'Die Sommenschlacht', Solleder (ed.), p. 238.
17 Ibid., pp. 238–39.
18 Ibid., p. 239.
19 Ibid. *Feldherr*, pp. 30–31.
20 Ibid., p. 241.
21 Ibid.
22 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger*, pp. 62–65.

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24 Ibid., pp. 68–69.
25 Hitler, M.K., p. 191. Maser, *Legende–Mythos–Wirklichkeit*, p. 615. Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, p. 29.
26 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger*, p. 69.
27 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 191.
28 Ibid., p. 193.
29 Kershaw, *Hubris*, p. 100.
30 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger*, p. 71.
31 Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, p. 30.
32 Ibid.
33 Bavarian official history, pp. 290–91.

12 DECLINING FORTUNE

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2 *Figaro*, 20 March 1917. Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, p. 31.
3 Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, p. 46.
4 Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, pp. 72–73. Knopp, *Bilanz*.
5 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 65–66.
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7 *Figaro*, 17, 18 March 1917. Beaverbrook, *Men and Power*, p. xxxv.
8 Mermiex, *Joffre*, pp. 233–34. Haig in Duroselle, *Guerre des Français*, p. 194.
9 *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten*, 11 April 1917.
10 *Times*, 23 June, 10 April 1917. *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 11 April 1917. *Times*, 14 April 1917.
11 *Kölnische Zeitung*, 16 April 1917.
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16 *Times*, 26 April 1917. *Vorwärts*, 19 April 1917.
17 *Times*, 18 April 1917. *Figaro*, 2 August 1918.
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19 *251 Divisions*. Bean, *Australia in the War*, vol. IV, p. 943. *AWM38 3DRL 606*, item 116, 25 June 1918.
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21 Tubeuf, 'Schlacht in Flandern', pp. 282–84.
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23 Ibid., pp. 284–85. Bean, *Australia in the War*, vol. IV, p. 707.
24 Bean, Ibid. Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, p. 79. Tubeuf, 'Schlacht in Flandern', p. 285.
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30 *251 Divisions*, p. 139. Casualties in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 381–85. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 201. Beumelburg, *Flandern 1917*, pp. 29–33.
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32 Ibid.
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34 *Times*, 6 October 1917. Beumelburg, *Flandern 1917*, p. 124. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 10 October 1917.
35 *Herald* (Melbourne), 19 October 1917. *Times*, 7 November 1917, 30 October 1917. Beumelburg, *Flandern 1917*, pp. 151–53.

13 1918

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2 Tubeuf, ibid. Casualties in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 381–85. *Table Talk 1941–1944*, pp. 232–33.
3 Casualties in Solleder (ed.), *Vier Jahre Westfront*, pp. 381–85. *251 Divisions*, p. 139. Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 170. *Table Talk*, pp. 80–81.
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5 Brandmayer, ibid.
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7 Ibid.
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11 Middlebrook's figures are 38,225 officers and 607,443 men, Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, p. 25.
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27 Ibid., pp. 98–99.
28 Tubeuf, 'Stellungskampf bei Montdidier', pp. 309–310.
29 Ibid., pp. 319–21.
30 Ibid., pp. 323–24.
31 Ibid., p. 324.
32 Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, p. 16. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, p. 191.

33 Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, pp. 85–88.
34 Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, pp. 25–26. *Table Talk*, p. 119. Maser, ibid., p. 88.
35 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 1 August 1918. *Age* (Melbourne), 6 August 1918.
36 Ludendorff, *Memories*, vol. II, p. 679. Bose, *Katastrophe*, pp. 45, 201. Lossberg, *Tätigkeit im Weltkrieg*, p. 438.
37 Ludendorff, *Memories*, vol. II, p. 679. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 8 August 1918.
38 Ludendorff, ibid., p. 711 and vol. I, p. 379. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 9, 10 August 1918.
39 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 10, 11 and 12 August 1918.
40 *Berliner Tageblatt*, 14 August 1918.
41 Foerster, *Ludendorff in Ungluck*, pp. 48–49. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 24 August 1918. *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, 22 August 1918.
42 Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, pp. 29–31. Baligrand, 'Ende wie Anfang', pp. 328–32.
43 *Figaro*, 2 September 1918.
44 Bean diary, *AWM38 3DRL 606*, item 116, 21 September 1918. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique*, p. 28. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, pp. 200–201. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 5 September 1918. *Morgen-Post*, 9 September 1918.
45 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, pp. 201–202.
46 Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, p. 177.
47 Westenkircher, Lugauer and Raab in Joachimsthaler, *Korrektur*, pp. 177–78.
48 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, pp. 202–206.

EPILOGUE: THE GREATEST COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF ALL TIME

1 Since 1918, Black Mary's has been an *estaminet*, a butcher's shop and a photo-copying business, but has recently reverted to private use. The wall-studs, dating from 1942, which once held a plaque identifying this as Hitler's wartime billet are still there, though the plaque itself is now housed in a trench museum at Fromelles. Once rural outposts connected by narrow-gauge tramways, modern-day Fromelles and Fournes are feeder suburbs, inhabited mostly by urban professionals who live in neat modern cottages and commute to the Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing conurbation.
2 Breker, *Hitler et moi*. Keitel in Hoffmann, *Hitler im Westen*, p. 5.
3 Hoffmann, *Hitler im Westen*, p. 108.
4 Churchill, *World Crisis*, p. 950.
5 Lieutenant Colonel von Lüneschloss, Major General Friedrich Petz and Colonel Spatny, all cited in Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, p. 87.
6 Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 9–10, 186–87. Brandmayer, *Meldegänger Hitler*, pp. 7–8, 32.
7 Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, p. 15.
8 Schnell cited in Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, p. 85.
9 Meyer, *Mit Adolf Hitler*, p. 65. Mend, *Hitler im Felde*, pp. 87–88, 160, 186–87.
10 Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, p. 26.
11 Ibid., p. 24.
12 Ibid., pp. 54–55.
13 Scherff in Maser, *Legend, Myth & Reality*, p. 270, 280–81. Keitel at War Trials, Nuremburg, IMT, vol. X, p. 600. Kielmannsegg in Knopp, *Bilanz*, p. 231.
14 De Maizière in Knopp, *Bilanz*, p. 231. Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, p. 249.
15 Wiedemann, ibid., pp. 249–53.
16 Mayr in Knopp, *Bilanz*, p. 92.
17 Ibid.
18 Irving, 'Goebbels' Diary', and *Goebbels: Mastermind*. Knopp, *Bilanz*, p. 126. Wiedemann, *Feldherr*, p. 33.
19 Wiedemann, ibid. *Table Talk*, pp. 17, 28, 665.

20 *Table Talk*, ibid. Futurist Manifesto and W.M. Hughes cited in Williams, *Quarantined Culture*, p. 54. Fischer, *Kaiserreich to Third Reich*, p. 54.
21 *Table Talk*, pp. xxxi–xxxii, 33, 68, 469, 478.
22 Ibid., p. 460.
23 Ibid., p. 442.
24 Beumelburg, *Von 1914 bis 1939*, p. 60.
25 «Größten Feldherrn aller Zeiten», Bernd Freytag von Lothringen, General-Staff Officer 1939–45, in Knopp, *Bilanz*, p. 241.

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